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**DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE**

**The Talking Dead: An Exploration of the  
Graveyard as a Literary Device in Máirtín Ó  
Cadhain's *Graveyard Clay* and George Saunders's  
*Lincoln in the Bardo***

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V Praze dne 22.12.2020

I declare that the following MA thesis is my own work for which I used only the sources and literature mentioned, and that this thesis has not been used in the course of other university studies or in order to acquire the same or another type of diploma.

In Prague, 22 December 2020

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**The Talking Dead: An Exploration of the Graveyard as a Literary  
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Table of Contents

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Introduction .....                                       | 5   |
| Chapter 1 .....  | 21  |
| <b>On Religion and the Afterlife</b>                     |     |
| Chapter 2 .....  | 46  |
| <b>On Language and Bakhtin's Theory of Heteroglossia</b> |     |
| Chapter 3 .....  | 76  |
| <b>On History and Community</b>                          |     |
| Conclusion.....  | 114 |
| Bibliography .....                                       | 121 |
| Abstract .....   | 126 |

## An Introduction

The intent of this thesis is a comprehensive comparison between Máirtín Ó Cadhain's novel *Cré na Cille* and George Saunders's novel *Lincoln in the Bardo*. Ó Cadhain, born and raised in Ireland, wrote *Cré na Cille* in the Irish language and the novel was first published back in 1949, whereas *Lincoln in the Bardo* is a far more contemporary work, having been published in 2017, and it was written by Saunders, a professor at Syracuse University. Despite these differences, the two texts share many similarities and parallels with one another, and are thus ripe for a serious literary comparison, particularly as little long-form scholarly work has been undertaken in this specific area. The literary plaudits of each work and their respective authors are long. Not only was *Cré na Cille* "chosen by UNESCO as an outstanding work, with a recommendation that it be translated into other European languages ... [but] Ó Cadhain was elected a member of the Royal Irish Academy, the first Irish-language writer to receive the honour."<sup>1</sup> Famed Irish novelist, Colm Tóibín, heaped praise on the text, claiming it to be "The greatest novel to be written in the Irish language, and among the best books to come out of Ireland in the twentieth century",<sup>2</sup> and scholar Radvan Markus argued for *Cré na Cille*'s right to take its place alongside classics of European literature such as *Don Quixote*, *Tristram Shandy* and *Ulysses*.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, *Lincoln in the Bardo* was an immediate bestseller and went on to

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<sup>1</sup> Liam Mac Con Iomaire, "An Introductory Note," in Máirtín Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay: Cré na Cille*, trans. Liam Mac Con Iomaire and Tim Robinson (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press and Cló Iar-Chonnacht, 2017), xxi.

<sup>2</sup> Colm Tóibín, jacket blurb, in Máirtín Ó Cadhain, *The Dirty Dust*, trans. Alan Titley (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press and Cló Iar-Chonnacht, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Radvan Markus, "The Carnavalesque Against Entropy: Máirtín Ó Cadhain's *Cré na Cille*," *Litteraria Pragensia*, 28, no. 55 (2018): 69.

receive critical validation by winning the prestigious Man Booker prize in 2017.<sup>4</sup> Decorated contemporary novelist Colson Whitehead effusively praised the novel, when he called it a “luminous feat of generosity and humanism.”<sup>5</sup>

The most significant point of comparison between the two novels is the unique, experimental story-telling device chosen by their authors and how they use that device as a means to depict an entire community. Both texts are set (almost) entirely in graveyards and all of the major characters are dead and buried; also of great importance is the fact that both stories are told through the direct speech of their characters, meaning that there is no traditional narrator to describe the setting or chronicle the plot for the reader, thus the language used by individual characters takes on a measure of heightened importance in comparison to more traditional novels.

With these similarities in mind, it might be surprising to find that little scholarly work has been done involving both of these novels, although the relative dearth of content is more understandable given *Lincoln in the Bardo*’s recent publication and the fact that *Cré na Cille* was not available in English for many years. However, it should be pointed out that Donald E. Morse did publish a short scholarly article comparing the two novels in 2018.<sup>6</sup> Morse’s article seems to be the first serious academic attempt to link *Cré na Cille* with *Lincoln in the Bardo* and for that it should be acknowledged, although the paper functions as more of an introduction to both texts.

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<sup>4</sup> “Hardcover Fiction Books – Best Sellers,” *The New York Times*, March 5, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers/2017/03/05/hardcover-fiction/>; “Man Booker Prize: “George Saunders Wins for *Lincoln in the Bardo*,” *BBC News*, October 18, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-41585512>.

<sup>5</sup> Colson Whitehead, “Colson Whitehead on George Saunders’s Novel about Lincoln and Lost Souls,” *The New York Times*, February 9, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/09/books/review/lincoln-in-the-bardo-george-saunders.html>.

<sup>6</sup> See: Donald E. Morse, ““This undiscovered country’ in Máirtín Ó Cadhain’s *Cré na Cille* and George Saunders’s *Lincoln in the Bardo*,” *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Philologica* 10, no. 1 (2018): 25-33, <http://www.acta.sapientia.ro/acta-phil/C10-1/phil101-02.pdf>.

Morse, using Alan Titley's less academic translation entitled *The Dirty Dust*, provides an overview of each novel, while highlighting some of the key differences between the afterlives depicted by Ó Cadhain and Saunders. This thesis intends to analyze these differences, while also examining the many similarities between the two novels.

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It should be mentioned that – while both *Cré na Cille* and *Lincoln in the Bardo* are exceedingly creative novels – by no means are they the first (or only) literary works to use the conceit of voices in the graveyard as a storytelling device. For instance, Fyodor Dostoyevsky published a short story in 1873 called “Bobok”, in which the narrator wanders off among a cemetery's tombstones while attending a funeral. The man “lies down on a long stone which was of the shape of a marble coffin ... [and begins] to hear things of all sort being said” by the corpses beneath his feet.<sup>7</sup> The majority of the story consists of dialogue between the deceased, with the narrator discreetly listening in, until the magic spell is broken when the narrator sneezes aloud and “all became as silent as one expects it to be in a churchyard, [and] it all vanished like a dream”.<sup>8</sup> The most important similarity that “Bobok” bears to *Cré na Cille* (aside from the obvious similarity of their settings) is how petty and trivial the dialogue of Dostoyevsky's characters can be; while the idea that the dead become silent when they hear the narrator sneeze suggests some level of interaction between the real world and the underworld, just as there is a merging of the two worlds at various points in *Lincoln in the Bardo*. Another text worth pointing out is Edward Lee Masters's best-selling 1915 collection of poems entitled *Spoon River Anthology*. Told through a series of short poems – each one an epitaph on the tombstone of a

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<sup>7</sup> Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Gambler/Bobok/A Nasty Story*, trans. Jesse Coulson (London: Penguin, 1973) <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/d/dostoyevsky/d72bo/>.

<sup>8</sup> Dostoyevsky, “Bobok,” 72.

deceased citizen from the fictional town of Spoon River, Illinois – Masters is able to paint a clear picture of a small American town in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although *Spoon River Anthology* is drastically different from both *Cré na Cille* and *Lincoln in the Bardo* – particularly in that Masters’s characters are never given the opportunity to speak, as, instead, the reader is solely reliant on the epitaphs for information – it is still an important text to note, considering the imaginative trope that Masters uses to depict an entire community.<sup>9</sup>

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Next, it might be helpful take a brief look at each author’s biographical background, if only to provide the reader with a deeper understanding of the men whose work we will be studying so intently.

Ó Cadhain is long since deceased. Born in 1906 “in the townland of Cnocán Glas ... in the south Conamara Gaeltacht”, he passed away at the age of sixty-five in October of 1970 in Dublin.<sup>10</sup> He spent his life fighting to preserve the Irish language, working in different capacities to promote and save his mother tongue. He was first employed, for a decade, as an Irish teacher in the Galway Gaeltacht before his membership in the Irish Republican Army (IRA) cost him his job in 1936.<sup>11</sup> Ó Cadhain was then arrested in 1939 “under the Offenses against the State Act”, and subsequently spent nearly the entirety of World War II as a political prisoner, mostly in the Curragh Camp in Kildare.<sup>12</sup> After his release from political prison and the ending of the war, Ó

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<sup>9</sup> Also: an interesting coincidence has been pointed out in numerous reviews of *Lincoln in the Bardo* – one of *Spoon River Anthology*’s fictional epitaphs is taken from the tombstone of one Ann Rutledge, a real woman believed to have been Abraham Lincoln’s “legendary first love”. For more, see: Thomas Mallon, “George Saunders Gets Inside Lincoln’s Head,” *The New Yorker*, February 13 & 20, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/02/13/george-saunders-gets-inside-lincolns-head>.

<sup>10</sup> Mac Con Iomaire, “An Introductory Note,” vii and xvi.

<sup>11</sup> Mac Con Iomaire, “An Introductory Note,” ix.

<sup>12</sup> Mac Con Iomaire, “An Introductory Note,” x.



Cadhain built a career on his knowledge and mastery of the Irish language. First, he joined Rannóg an Aistriúcháin (the Parliamentary Transition Staff) in 1947, where he was part of a team what was “given the task of forming a standardized spelling of morphology of Irish, based on the spoken dialects as well as on the written language”.<sup>13</sup> Later in life, Ó Cadhain taught at the venerable Trinity College Dublin, where he lectured on the Irish language and was, by all accounts, adored by his students; he continued to rise through the ranks at Trinity, where he was named “to the chair of Irish as Established Professor” in 1969, just a year before his death.<sup>14</sup>

Saunders, on the other hand, is still alive and well (as far as I know). Typically focusing on the short story, Saunders is regarded by many as a sort of living legend in the field of fiction writing, as this glowing quote from Joel Lovell states: “For people who pay close attention to the state of American fiction, he [Saunders] has become a kind of superhero.”<sup>15</sup> Raised in the Chicago suburb of Oak Forest, Illinois, Saunders graduated from the Colorado School of Mines, before going to “work for an oil-exploration company in the jungles of Sumatra.”<sup>16</sup> After his work in Sumatra, Saunders applied to and was accepted into Syracuse University’s esteemed MFA in creative writing program in 1985.<sup>17</sup> Following his graduation, he moved with his family to Rochester, in upstate New York, in order to take a job with the Radian Corporation where he worked as a technical writer.<sup>18</sup> After eight years of writing on the side – around the responsibilities of a full-time job – Saunders published his first book in 1996, a collection of

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<sup>13</sup> Mac Con Iomaire, “An Introductory Note,” xi and xiii.

<sup>14</sup> Mac Con Iomaire, “An Introductory Note,” xiv.

<sup>15</sup> While Joel Lovell may not be a household name, the feature also sees Saunders receiving effusive praise from contemporary literary heavyweights such as Mary Karr, Tobias Wolff, and Laurie Moore. See: Joel Lovell, “George Saunders Has Written The Best Book You’ll Read This Year,” *The New York Times Magazine*, January 3, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/06/magazine/george-saunders-just-wrote-the-best-book-youll-read-this-year.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Lovell, “George Saunders.”

<sup>17</sup> Lovell, “George Saunders.”

<sup>18</sup> Lovell, “George Saunders.”

short stories called *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline*, to high praise; subsequently, due to the work's positive critical reception and his new-found literary fame, Saunders accepted a position as a professor of creative writing at Syracuse university, a post that he has held ever since.

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As some readers may be unfamiliar with the texts in question, I feel that it would be convenient to include short descriptions of the two novels. Let us start by looking at *Cré na Cille*, in which – as mentioned above – all of the characters are dead. Ó Cadhain's novel is set in a graveyard, located in a remote area of western Ireland – in fact, it is the geographic region where Ó Cadhain was from: “Cois Fharraige in South Conamara”.<sup>19</sup> Taking place during the Second World War, it is an experimental text that it is composed entirely of dialogue. Further, Ó Cadhain does not distinguish between who is speaking at any one moment, therefore forcing the reader into a heightened state of attentiveness in order to ascertain who is talking. The characters bicker and agree and reminisce and lament and just chat with each other, thus discussion being the main force propelling the novel forward. In this sense, it is a very static work as the characters are all interred and, quite literally, trapped in their coffins beneath the earth. Yet *Cré na Cille* is never dull, in large degree thanks to the exuberant language of the graveyard's inhabitants – though they have gone into that good night, they most certainly have not gone quietly.

While *Cré na Cille* may not have a main character in the traditional sense, Caitríona Pháidín can certainly be considered as the narrative hub of the novel.<sup>20</sup> Hers is the first voice that

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<sup>19</sup> Mac Con Iomaire, “An Introductory Note,” xxv.

<sup>20</sup> Alan Titley writes that “talk is the principal character in this novel”, a comment that, while slightly hyperbolic, is also fairly accurate. Alan Titley, “Translator's Introduction,” in Máirtín Ó Cadhain, *The Dirty Dust* trans. Alan Titley (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press and Indreabhán: Cló Iar-Chonnacht, 2016), vii.

the reader encounters upon opening *Cré na Cille* (“I wonder am I buried in the Pound Plot or the Fifteen-Shilling Plot?” she asks, having just arrived in the land of the dead) and she is the character whose voice continually resurfaces throughout the text.<sup>21</sup> The narrative structure of the novel is quite complex, with myriad plots appearing, disappearing, reappearing, converging and diverging throughout the text. To further complicate matters, these stories concern two different planes of existence: the ‘life’ of the characters in the graveyard, and the ongoing life of their friends and family in the real world.

The graveyard of Ó Cadhain’s creation is equally absurd and humorous. The novel’s opening page lists the Time of the novel as “Eternity”, and so the characters have to improvise unique ways of passing the time.<sup>22</sup> In Caitríona’s case, this mostly involves haranguing her neighbors and spreading negative stories about her sister, Nell, who is still alive. There is also the character of Nóra Sheáinín who, despite being dead, has decided to better herself by becoming ‘cultured’ in the graveyard. Meanwhile, another character composes lengthy novels, which no one wants to listen to. At one point, a vote is held amongst all of the graveyard’s inhabitants in order to select a leader for their community and, later in the novel, a Rotary Club is established to “improve the minds of the people here and to give breadth and scope to their cultural feeling”.<sup>23</sup>

After *Cré na Cille*’s publication, there was “wild speculation about its origins” as many people believed it to have been inspired by either “Bobok” or *Spoon River Anthology*.<sup>24</sup> Ó

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<sup>21</sup> Máirtín Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, trans. Liam Mac Con Iomaire and Tim Robinson (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 3.

<sup>22</sup> Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 1.

<sup>23</sup> Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 202. Despite its lofty intentions, the Rotary’s first *Colloquium* descends into chaos, with all of the characters talking over one another.

<sup>24</sup> Titley, “Translator’s Introduction,” x.

Cadhain, however, denied gaining inspiration from these sources. When asked about the initial idea for the novel, Ó Cadhain remembered an incident that occurred sometime after he was released from the Curragh Camp where he was held as a political prisoner.<sup>25</sup> He and a few others were digging a grave in advance of a local woman being buried on a rainy day and they were running out of time – soon the funeral would start and the body had yet to be interred.<sup>26</sup> Ó Cadhain recalled “We said we’d dig one grave and that would be it. On our way home one of my neighbors said: ‘Do you know where we sneaked her eventually,’ he said, ‘down on top of a person whom I will call Micil Rua.’ ‘Oho!’ said another, ‘there will be some *grammar* there alright!’”<sup>27</sup> More than serving as just inspiration for the novel, the idea of a corpse being placed into the wrong grave is a key storytelling device used by Ó Cadhain throughout the text. A good number of the novel’s chapters (or ‘interludes’ as they are called in the text) begin with a local being mistakenly placed into Caitríona’s grave, as in this exchange:

– Seáinín Liam. Ababúna! They’re burying you in the wrong grave, Seáinín. This is Caitríona Pháidín’s grave ...

– Arrah, isn’t that always the way in this cemetery, Caitríona my dear?<sup>28</sup>

And it is in this way that news from the world of the living is brought to the world of the dead.<sup>29</sup> Each new entrant to the graveyard is interrogated in regards to what has happened up-above since the last time someone died. Inevitably the mistake is discovered, and the corpse is placed in its proper grave (“Where have you gone, young man? Where are you? ... They’ve carried you

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<sup>25</sup> Mac Con Iomaire, “An Introductory Note,” xxvi.

<sup>26</sup> Mac Con Iomaire, “An Introductory Note,” xxvii.

<sup>27</sup> Mac Con Iomaire, “An Introductory Note,” xxvii.

<sup>28</sup> Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 67.

<sup>29</sup> Mac Con Iomaire, “An Introductory Note,” xxvi.

off from me...” cries Caitríona at one point).<sup>30</sup> Then the characters settle into the serious business of discussing and debating the latest gossip, parsing it minutely, as they try to glean as much as possible in regards to the fortunes of their friends and enemies who still live; and it is this cycle which the novel repeats over the course of its ten interludes, with each new arrival to the graveyard supplying the corpses with fresh scuttlebutt from above. While *Cré na Cille* does not contain a traditional narrative arc – further adding to its experimental style – the book does not lack in storylines, as each character has his or her own problems and preoccupations that they struggle with throughout the text, such as Caitríona’s futile quest for “a cross of Island limestone” to be placed over her grave and Nóra’s ironic pursuit of culture.<sup>31</sup>

Despite its reputation as one of the greatest works of fiction ever written in the Irish language, it took an extraordinary long time before *Cré na Cille* was translated into English.<sup>32</sup> Initially published in 1949, it was not until 2015 that an English friendly version finally hit shelves: titled *The Dirty Dust*, this initial offering was translated by the novelist Alan Titley, and was published by Yale University Press in conjunction with the Irish publishing house Cló Iar-Connacht. *The Dirty Dust* was quickly followed by another translation – this one a collaborative effort between the translators Liam Mac Con Iomaire and Tim Robinson – entitled *Graveyard Clay* in 2016. *Graveyard Clay* was released by the same two publishing houses that released *The Dirty Dusty* one year prior.

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<sup>30</sup> Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 124.

<sup>31</sup> Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 8.

<sup>32</sup> Mark Harmon even noted wryly that *Cré na Cille* was published in *both* Norwegian and Danish before a full English language translation was made available to the public. For more, see: Mark Harmon, “‘Wake Up, I Tell You’: The Vibrant Afterlife of Irish Writer Máirtín Ó Cadhain,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, May 2016, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/wake-tell-vibrant-afterlife-irish-writer-martin-o-cadhain>.

The reasons for the sixty-six year delay between Ó Cadhain's Irish-language original and the first widely available English translation are somewhat murky, although one contributing factor is that *Cré na Cille* held such a lofty status in the canon of Irish literature that translators shied away from the task, in fear of botching the job; even the co-translator of *Graveyard Clay* has admitted the trepidation he felt regarding the undertaking: "'it would be like translating 'Ulysses' into Irish,' Mac Con Iomaire said. 'You daren't put a foot wrong if you are translating Máirtín Ó Cadhain.'"<sup>33</sup>

It is somewhat incredible that one novel could father two such drastically different translations. *Graveyard Clay* is restrained and the translators' goals are focused: "to give the Anglophone reader the most accurate answer we [Mac Con Iomaire and Robinson] can provide to the question, What is in this book?"<sup>34</sup> Alan Titley, meanwhile, took a more creative approach to translation, basically translating the character's mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Irish dialect into modern day English, which leads to some epic strings of curses not fit for day-time television, as well as a few anachronisms which brought the ire of some reviewers.<sup>35</sup>

It is not my place to judge which translation is better and, while Titley's *The Dirty Dust* is enjoyable and entertaining in its own right, for the purposes of this thesis I will rely *only* on Mac Con Iomaire and Robinson's *Graveyard Clay*. It is an easy decision, for *Graveyard Clay* comes "outfitted with footnotes and a bibliography, [and] is clearly meant for the classroom and for academic citation."<sup>36</sup> Thus, from here on out, when I refer to *Cré na Cille* it is in reference to

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<sup>33</sup> William Brennan, "The Irish Novel That's So Good People Were Scared To Translate It," *The New Yorker*, March 17, 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-irish-novel-thats-so-good-people-were-scared-to-translate-it>.

<sup>34</sup> Tim Robinson, "On Translating Cré Na Cille," in Máirtín Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, trans. Liam Mac Con Iomaire and Tim Robinson (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), xxxv.

<sup>35</sup> Harmon, "'Wake Up.'"

<sup>36</sup> Brennan, "The Irish Novel."

*Graveyard Clay*. It is also important to note that since I am working with a translation (however superb and academic it may be) this will necessarily limit my analysis of the novel's language in the second chapter. However, this hindrance will not affect the merit of the thesis as such, given that its core value comes from the overall comparison of *Cré na Cille* with *Lincoln in the Bardo*, a study which has not been undertaken at any great length before.

Next, let us move on to *Lincoln in the Bardo* in which *most* of the characters are dead. Like *Cré na Cille*, it is a novel set in a graveyard, although Saunders places his characters in the real Oak Hill Cemetery which is located in the Georgetown area of Washington, D.C. Whereas *Cré na Cille* takes place in "Eternity" – suggesting that the characters are destined to chat and argue literally forever – the events of *Lincoln in the Bardo* take place over the course of a single night.<sup>37</sup> The novel is set in February 1862, just as the American Civil War was ramping up and evolving into a full-blown war, a critical moment in history that will be explored later in this thesis. *Lincoln in the Bardo* can also be considered an experimental novel, as it is comprised of two distinctly unique text styles: the first being the dialogue of the characters, all of whom are dead and buried in the graveyard, and the second being Saunders's inclusion of historical documents which provide context to the novel's historical setting. However, Saunders does simplify his readers' task by always explicitly stating who is speaking, thus relieving readers of the substantial deductive burden found in Ó Cadhain's text.

The novel is a dazzling blend of fact and fiction, a historical fiction novel that "grew out of a heartbreaking fact: after the death of his eleven year old son Willie, a distraught Abraham

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<sup>37</sup> The time in question being the evening of February 25<sup>th</sup> through to the early morning hours of February 26<sup>th</sup> 1862 according to a night watchman's logbook entry fictionalized by Saunders. Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo* (New York: Random House, 2017), 65.

Lincoln visited the boy's tomb on several occasions and held his son's body in his arms."<sup>38</sup> In an appearance on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, in promotion of the novel, Saunders mentioned that he first heard that anecdote regarding Lincoln and his son more than twenty years before he would actually finish the work, but that he initially thought "no way, too hard, too earnest, too, sort of, sentimental" and tried to forget about it.<sup>39</sup> Yet the image of Lincoln holding the body of his poor, unfortunate son was so striking – Saunders calls it "a melding of the Lincoln Memorial and the Pietà"<sup>40</sup> – that he eventually wrote the novel because "he didn't want to be the guy who on his grave it says 'never did the thing he really wanted to do'."<sup>41</sup>

The action begins when Willie Lincoln arrives anonymously in the afterlife ("The newcomer was a boy of some ten or eleven years. A handsome little fellow, blinking and gazing cautiously around him [...] Resembling a fish who, having washed ashore, lies immobile and alert, acutely aware of its vulnerability", note two onlookers) and is greeted by a triumvirate of men who comprise the narrative core of the novel, Roger Bevins III, Hans Vollman, and The Reverend Everly Thomas.<sup>42</sup>

In comparison to the cemetery in *Cré na Cille*, the graveyard of *Lincoln in the Bardo* is a far more physically active place as the characters are able to leave their graves and wander about the premises during the night. This corporeal freedom bestowed upon his characters allows Saunders to incorporate more of a traditional narrative arc into the storyline, as the dead are not

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<sup>38</sup> Jeff Baker, "George Saunders' first novel resurrects Lincoln—and a cacophony of ghosts," *The Seattle Times*, February 19, 2017, <https://www.seattletimes.com/entertainment/books/george-saunders-first-novel-resurrects-lincoln-and-a-cacophony-of-ghosts/>.

<sup>39</sup> *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, prod. Spartina Productions and CBS Television Studios, February 15, 2017, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z5K0Dum\\_bTk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z5K0Dum_bTk).

<sup>40</sup> Mallon, "George Saunders Gets Inside Lincoln's Head."

<sup>41</sup> *The Late Show*.

<sup>42</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 29.



solely reliant on language as a means to drive the plot forward like in *Cré na Cille*; rather, they can ‘walk-skim’ around the cemetery, interacting with their unique underworld. And ‘unique’ really is the operative word here, because the afterlife created by Saunders is truly a literary sight to behold: based on the Tibetan Buddhist concept of the bardo, the characters inhabit a liminal space in which their ghostly forms manifest all sorts of bizarre physical appearances, such as Roger Bevins who “had several sets of eyes All darting to and fro All sniffing His hands (he had multiple sets of hands, or else his hands were so quick they seemed to be many)”.<sup>43</sup>

In a way that is reminiscent of *Cré na Cille*, *Lincoln in the Bardo* also contains a plethora of characters, all of whom have their own preoccupations; however, the overarching plot of the novel concerns Vollman, Bevins, and the Reverend Thomas’s night-long attempt to save Willie Lincoln from becoming eternally trapped in the bardo, all while Abraham Lincoln – physically present in the graveyard’s crypt and therefore inhabiting the ‘real world’ – mourns his son’s tragic death while internally wrestling with questions regarding the Civil War.

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This thesis will consist of three separate chapters, along with this introduction and a conclusion, which, when taken together, should serve as a broad, encompassing comparison between the two novels.

The first chapter aims to compare the two afterlives depicted by the authors, comparing and contrasting the situations faced by the characters after their demise. As noted earlier, *Lincoln in the Bardo* takes place in the Tibetan Buddhist concept of the bardo; however, the cast of *Lincoln in the Bardo* is not Buddhist in any way – some characters are staunch Christians, others

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<sup>43</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 27. The bardo – what it is and its significance to the text – is explored in greater length in chapter one.

are agnostic, while some appear to be atheists given over to a life of debauchery. On the surface, this collision between Buddhist and Christian thought is startling, although it makes sense given that Saunders likes “to describe [himself] as a Buddhist *and* a Catholic, having been raised in the Catholic Church before converting to Buddhism in his 40s.”<sup>44</sup> With the help of important Tibetan Buddhist concepts, I will be able to take a closer look at the real-life religious philosophies that Saunders used to construct his entirely unique, fictional afterlife. In contrast, it is noteworthy just how *uninterested* the dead in *Cré na Cille* are about the fate of their eternal souls, particularly given the ubiquity of the Catholic church in Ireland throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Most of the characters are far more concerned with petty arguments and social status than they are with the fact that they are actually dead, a misguided priority that is a source of subtle humor throughout the text. However, the Trump of the Graveyard – whose lyrical speeches begin six of the novel’s ten interludes, are certainly elevated above the run-of-the-mill complaints of the graveyard’s denizens and are viewed by many critics as having obvious Biblical overtones – brings an important metaphysical component to the text, and its role will be analyzed in this chapter as well.

The second chapter will focus on language in both *Cré na Cille* and *Lincoln in the Bardo*. As mentioned earlier, both novels are told almost entirely through dialogue; thus, language – particularly the direct speech of characters – becomes crucially important. Each character must appear vibrant and life-like and completely unique and individual – the reader needs to be able to differentiate them from one another. I will use the theory of heteroglossia (‘raznorecie’ in Russian), developed by the Russian philosopher and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, to analyze

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<sup>44</sup> Tal Rosenberg, “The Chicago Education of George Saunders,” Chicago Reader, February 21, 2017 <https://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/george-saunders-interview-lincoln-in-the-bardo/Content?oid=25621253>.

the use of language in both novels. Bakhtin wrote that “the novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types ... and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized.”<sup>45</sup> To Bakhtin, any one language can be ‘internally stratified’ in countless different ways, meaning that it can be subdivided into groups like “social dialects, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of the authorities” and that it is the novel’s ability to use this “social diversity of speech types [i.e. heteroglossia] as a way to express its themes that make it a unique literary work.”<sup>46</sup> Bakhtin’s theories will be closely analyzed in the second chapter, as his theoretical work on heteroglossia will be essential in accurately interpreting novels that are so reliant on diversified language.

The third chapter has two aims: first, to take a look at the historical setting of each novel and, second, to provide an accurate picture of the communities depicted by the authors. A brief summary of the historical timeframe in which each text occurs will be given, followed by an analysis of how the characters fit within that specific epoch. In the case of *Lincoln in the Bardo*, as mentioned previously, the setting is the early stages of the Civil War, as the United States is beginning to realize, with a sense of growing horror, that the conflict between the Confederates and the Union is not going to be quickly or easily resolved, and that, instead, the country is headed for a long and bloody war. *Cré na Cille*, of course, takes place during World War II, a global conflict that, while Ireland officially remained neutral throughout the war’s duration, still had an enormous impact on the country’s citizens in many different ways.

The goal of this thesis is to analyze how both Ó Cadhain and Saunders use the unique storytelling device of voices in the graveyard as a means by which to depict a community in toto.

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<sup>45</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1983), 262.

<sup>46</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 262-263.

The conclusion will act as an all-encompassing summary of what we have learned, and of how successful the authors were in utilizing graveyards to portray entire communities in their work.

## Chapter One: On Religion and the Afterlife

“Death will have its due. We’ve always heard it said ...”<sup>1</sup>

In order to lay the groundwork for the rest of this project, I believe it would be helpful to begin by closely examining the setting of each novel. As noted earlier, the most striking similarity between *Cré na Cille* and *Lincoln in the Bardo* lies in the fact that each story is set in a graveyard and that the majority of the characters are dead and buried. Placing the story in a cemetery serves the same function for both Ó Cadhain and Saunders – a clever way to give voice to an entire community – yet it would be incorrect to claim that the graveyards are identical or, in some regards, even particularly similar. Therefore, the intent of this chapter is to provide an overview of the two cemeteries, illuminating their similarities and differences while highlighting their metaphysical roles within the text.

Ability to speak aside, the fate of the dead in *Cré na Cille* can be viewed as more realistic than their counterparts in *Lincoln in the Bardo*, considering the fact that after being placed into their coffins and lowered into the soil they are trapped within those same boxes with zero chance of getting out. The corpses in *Cré na Cille* are unable to move in any way, becoming, in a sense, little more than disembodied voices. Caitríona Pháidín’s neighbor in the cemetery, Muraed Phroinsiais, succinctly summarizes the situation to Caitríona by saying “Life’s the same, Caitríona, as it was in the ‘ould country,” except that all we see is the grave we’re in and we can’t leave the coffin.”<sup>2</sup> This lack of physical freedom, combined with the constant and frenetic chatter

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<sup>1</sup> Quote from Caitríona Pháidín in Máirtín Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, trans. Liam Mac Con Iomaire and Tim Robinson (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 98.

<sup>2</sup> Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 7.

of the surrounding deceased, creates anything but a peaceful environment for one to rest eternally. This atmosphere is commented upon in the novel's first interlude when Caitríona laments:

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph! – Am I alive or am I dead? Are these here alive or dead?

They're all giving out as much as they did above ground! I thought that once I was laid in the grave, free from chores and household cares and fear of wind or weather, there'd be some peace in store for me ... but why all this squabbling in the graveyard clay?”<sup>3</sup>

These lines are ironic in retrospect because, as the novel progresses, Caitríona becomes arguably the graveyard's most vociferous antagonist, constantly harassing and haranguing her neighbors with torrents of verbal abuse until many of them basically stop responding to her. In fact, Caitríona quickly loses hope of finding a peaceful afterlife, having learned that it is an impossibility in Ó Cadhain's world – later in the text, when the character of Bríd Terry is interred next to her, Caitríona remarks sarcastically “looking for peace, are you? That's what they all say when they arrive” before quickly changing the subject in order to interrogate Bríd in regards to the latest gossip above ground.<sup>4</sup> However, Caitríona's initial observation remains correct: this Irish graveyard is a place of constant bickering and chatting, not a place of tranquility. From a mental health perspective, the situation is certainly alarming for the characters and at various points in the novel it is almost as if the characters experience extreme bouts of cabin fever. Pádraig de Paor also commented on this potentially toxic environment when he wrote “everyone in the novel has woes and worries that eat away at her peace of mind.

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<sup>3</sup> Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 6-7.

<sup>4</sup> Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 95.

These anxieties are never-ending as there is no possibility of any resolution in the graveyard plot”.<sup>5</sup>

The incessant stream of chatter – both friendly and vitriolic – is brought about for two main reasons. The first, and most simple, being that the characters are just plain bored. After all, they are immobilized within their graves, seemingly for eternity, with little else to do but talk. The second reason is that death has loosened the lips of the characters. Gossip and taboo subjects which may have been avoided on earth are suddenly deemed fair game (at least by Caitríona who always shoots from the hip and never misses the opportunity to slander an opponent). Caitríona’s line of thinking in this regard is illuminated by her response to being labeled a gossip: “I’m no gossip. One thing about me, anything I saw or heard, I carried it into the graveyard clay with me. But it’s no harm to talk about it now that we’re on the way of eternal truth.”<sup>6</sup> Similar behavior is also evidenced at various points in the novel when some of the corpses begin to attack Peadar the Pub and Siúán the Shop, criticizing the pair’s dishonest business practices. The irony here, of course, is that none of the villagers would have dared to condemn either Peadar the Pub or Siúán the Shop, given that they were two of the most powerful members of the community. Both of these reasons contribute to the graveyard as a place not of peace, but of steady communication and conflict.

*Cré na Cille* begins with Caitríona delivering a three plus page monologue in which she voices her opinions on her own death and questions how her funeral went. Her speech is laden with religious references, and a reader with even a basic knowledge of the Catholic Church’s role in rural Irish society during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century would be forgiven for assuming that

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<sup>5</sup> Pádraig de Paor, “Ends, Endings and Endlessness in *Cré na Cille*,” in *New Trails and Beaten Paths in Celtic Studies*, ed. Maria Bloch-Trojnar et al. (Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2016), 80.

<sup>6</sup> Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 35.

Caitríona was a devoutly religious woman; after all, she notes “I have the scapular mantle on”<sup>7</sup>, before stating that “the crucifix is on my breast, the one I bought at the mission”, then complaining “They should have knotted the rosary beads round my fingers” and finally saying “I hope they lit the eight candles over my coffin in the chapel.”<sup>8</sup> At first glance, Caitríona’s burial seems to contain all of the elements one might expect to encounter at an Irish Catholic funeral, and while this may, in fact, be true, the reasons that these elements are in place cannot be said to be entirely pious.

One of the initial things to strike a reader who has picked up *Cré na Cille* for the first time is surely that the characters are very much *not* in heaven nor hell nor purgatory (nor in any other type of mystical afterlife for that matter) – they are just in their coffins, six feet below the earth’s surface. In addition, none of the characters appear to be particularly concerned by this fact. Nobody questions why they have not arrived in heaven after their deaths, nor are there any deep spiritual conversations about the meaning of spending eternity in their local graveyard or whether there is anything *beyond* the graveyard – basically the characters are just content to talk and argue about their lives. Of course, this is a work of fiction and Ó Cadhain chose the setting for specific reasons – if the text was set, for example, in the Judeo-Christian concept of heaven it would obviously be an entirely different novel and thus the lack of a spiritual afterlife is largely due to the novel’s setting and what the author was trying to accomplish. But it is still noteworthy to mention that none of the characters, all of whom were reared in a religious society, even broach the subject of *why* they are destined to remain in the graveyard seemingly forever. This fact has been commented upon by numerous scholars, particularly Pádraig de Paor who wrote

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<sup>7</sup> A footnote to the text explains that a scapular mantel was “two small squares of cloth attached by two strings and worn over the shoulders around the neck as a pious practice.” Mac Con Iomaire and Robinson in Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 3-4.



that “it is notable that no aspect of the Christian belief in the afterlife is mentioned in the [sic] *Cré na Cille*”.<sup>9</sup>

The answer as to why the characters are not concerned about the state of their eternal souls can be found by taking a closer look at Caitríona’s aforementioned ‘religious’ monologue. Yes, her burial and funeral followed all of the expected religious protocols of the day, but it becomes clear that they were not done out of any sense of deep-seated religious faith. Rather, by having the rites performed in a lavish manner she hopes to be regarded favorably (or even enviously) by her peers. For example, after wishing for ‘the eight candles over her coffin’, Caitríona reveals the true reason behind this wish, saying: “that’s something no corpse in that chapel ever had: eight candles. Curraoin only had four. Liam Thomáis the Tailor had six, but he has a daughter a nun in America.”<sup>10</sup> In short, Caitríona is attempting to break the local record for most candles lit over a coffin. She even becomes suspicious about the poor knotting of the rosary beads, casting blame on her sister Nell: “Nell herself did that, for sure. She’d have been delighted if they’d fallen on the floor when they were putting me in the coffin.”<sup>11</sup> Of course, these are character traits that become specifically applicable to Caitríona as the novel unfolds – she lusts after social status and is obsessed by the idea of being seen as ‘better’ than Nell, but the idea of religious practices having more social than actual religious significance is a theme that runs throughout the text. A prime example of this can be found in the love triangle between the deceased Big Master, his still-living wife the Schoolmistress, and her new lover Billyboy. When the Big Master learns that his wife has quickly become romantically involved with Billyboy – the town postman – after his death, the Big Master is, unsurprisingly, quite angry. He then learns

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<sup>9</sup> de Paor, “Ends, Endings and Endlessness in *Cré na Cille*,” 76.

<sup>10</sup> Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 4.

<sup>11</sup> Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 4.

that Billyboy has fallen ill and that the Schoolmistress is “caring for Billyboy from night till morning”, seemingly tending to her new beau far more attentively than she ever had for the Big Master (her long-time husband) during his terminal illness.<sup>12</sup> The Big Master is then given specifics as to how the Schoolmistress is attempting to save Billyboy’s life; not only has “she brought three doctors from Dublin to see him”, but he is told that:

She does the Stations of the Cross for him, day and night, Master, and a visit to St. Ina’s Well once a week. She made the pilgrimage to Knock Shrine for him this year, the pilgrimage to Croagh Patrick, to St. Columkille’s Well, to St. Mary’s Well, to St. Augustine’s Well, to St. Enda’s Well, to St. Bernan’s Well, to St. Callen’s Well, to St. Mac Dara’s Well, to St. Bodkin’s Well, to Conderg’s Bed, to St. Brigid’s Well, to the lake of the Saints and to Lough Derg ...”<sup>13</sup>

In typical Ó Cadhain fashion, the passage is humorous – the sheer extensiveness of the Schoolmistress’s devotions is, of course, comically absurd (not to mention likely impossible considering that she also has a full-time job). Yet the reader is also left with the impression that the Schoolmistress’s herculean series of pilgrimages is more social than religious, in a way quite similar to Caitríona’s burial rites. Rather than being regarded as a legitimate means of saving Billyboy’s life by spurring God to miraculously intervene and restore Billyboy to health, the pilgrimages seem to reflect the basic fact that the Schoolmistress has a deeper love for Billyboy than she ever had for the Big Master (much to the Big Master’s chagrin). Earlier in the novel, Caitríona shares her skepticism regarding the (il)legitimacy of St. Ina’s Well:

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<sup>12</sup> Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 156.

<sup>13</sup> Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 156-57.

He was cured at St. Ina's Well? Not likely! ... But indeed I wouldn't believe it was at St. Ina's Well he was cured. Nor would I believe there's any cure at all in St. Ina's Well. My son's wife wore out her kneecaps on pilgrimages there. Sure there isn't a well from our own well at home to the Well at the End of the World she didn't visit, for all she has to show for it. Always sickly.<sup>14</sup>

The schoolmistress's over the top acts of devotion function as a way for her to communicate her deep feelings for Billyboy, both to him and to the community as a whole – when she tells Máirtín Pockface “Lough Derg is worse than any of them ... My feet were bleeding for three days. But I wouldn't mind all the suffering if it did poor Billyboy some good. I'd crawl on my hands and knees from here to ...” it is the Schoolmistress's way of expressing her bountiful love for Billyboy, more so than her legitimately expecting him to be cured.<sup>15</sup>

While social status and how to gain it is undeniably one of Caitríona's motivating life forces, she is far from the only character in *Cré na Cille* who is driven by the desire to increase their social ranking within the graveyard community. The scholar Aindrias Ó Cathasaigh notes that this serves as an accurate reflection as to what life above ground in the rural west of Ireland was like at the time that Ó Cadhain, himself, lived there, writing that “The class struggle Ó Cadhain saw in his home place is replicated in the tension between those buried in more or less expensive plots, with greater or lesser funereal offerings, and the crucial question of whether a fancy cross is erected over their graves”.<sup>16</sup> Ó Cadhain's depiction of the division between classes in the Gaeltacht will be analyzed later in the thesis at greater length, but for now it will suffice to

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<sup>14</sup> Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 97.

<sup>15</sup> Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 157.

<sup>16</sup> Aindrias Ó Cathasaigh, “A Vision to Realise: Ó Cadhain's Politics,” *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 34, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 21, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/25515701>.

take a brief look at the matter of the ‘fancy crosses’, if only due to the critical role that they play in the social lives of the dead in *Cré na Cille*.

The first time that crosses are mentioned is early in the text by Caitríona, when she brags to Muraed that “Pádraig [Caitríona’s son] told me he’ll put a cross of Island limestone over me like the one over Peadar the Pub, and an inscription in Irish ... And he said he’d put a railing round the grave like the one round Siúán the Shop”.<sup>17</sup> A footnote to the text clarifies the importance of ‘Island limestone’, telling the reader that “The limestone of the Aran Islands, some ten miles off the south Conamara coast, was highly prized for tombstones in south Conamara”, while the comparison to Peadar the Pub and Siúán the Shop is significant because of the higher economic and social rank held by both while still alive.<sup>18</sup> Similarly to how Caitríona desired an extravagant burial and funeral, she is again lusting after something which could increase her social standing in the eyes of others. Of course, an expensive cross is never actually placed over Caitríona’s grave at any point in the novel and this is one of the main sources of her consternation – she constantly questions new arrivals in the cemetery as to whether her cross has been completed or not and the lack of progress increasingly vexes her. But Caitríona is not the only character who regards the topic of gravestone crosses so seriously; in fact, the entire underground community considers crosses to be the *essential* social currency of the afterlife – more valuable than traditional wealth (i.e. money) or good character. In many ways, the characters’ collective obsession about one another’s grave markers is played for laughs by Ó Cadhain, especially as the reader becomes increasingly aware of how absurd it is to place such a great deal of import on something so trivial (particularly when considering that none of the

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<sup>17</sup> Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 8-9.

<sup>18</sup> Mac Con Iomaire and Robinson in Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 8.

characters can even *view* the crosses, seeing as they are dead and buried). Yet the topic of crosses is no laughing matter for the deceased, with Caitríona explaining their communal value at one point, saying: “but a cross over your grave here is as good as having a big slated house above ground, with a name over the door”.<sup>19</sup> It would even seem that a substantial cross can boost one’s social ranking in comparison to how they were regarded when alive, with Caitríona again commenting that “a cross on your grave here makes even the Filthy-Feet Breed respectable”.<sup>20</sup>

With these sentiments in mind, Caitríona’s increasing frustration at the extended delay of her cross’s construction becomes more understandable. In fact, the simple reality that Caitríona’s grave is cross-less is repeatedly thrown in her face by the others in attempts to depreciate her worth – for instance, Nóra Sheáinín says “I’m better known and respected in this graveyard than you are. I have a fine decent cross over me, which is more than you have, Caitríona” and she later overhears Nóra saying “My *goodness me*, Dotie, that strap [Caitríona] isn’t entitled to talk at all. Lying there without a cross or inscription over her, like a letter posted with no address”.<sup>21</sup> Whether Caitríona would ever admit it or not, her lack of a cross is not the only reason that she is ostracized by her peers from time to time; for, surely, the rest of the graveyard would forgive her (if only slightly) for not having a cross if she would attempt to be less combative and more empathetic. But Caitríona never shows the self-awareness to improve her behavior and so her neighbors continue to insult her for not having a cross above her grave. It is also important to note that the vital role the crosses play in the ‘society’ of the graveyard can be considered to have a larger significance – more than just a quirk of the text and a means by which to infuriate Caitríona repeatedly. Remembering that Caitríona – who desires little more in life (and death)

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<sup>19</sup> Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 49.

<sup>20</sup> Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 50.

<sup>21</sup> Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 44 and 207.

than to rise to the top of her village's social caste – never actually gets the cross of Island limestone by the time *Cré na Cille* concludes, Aindrias Ó Cathasaigh states that “The futility of class society is replicated in the ultimate dashing of the central character's dream of social one-upmanship.”<sup>22</sup> This interpretation of the crosses' significance is, of course, completely in line with Ó Cadhain's personal politics touched upon in the introductory chapter and is an important point for the reader to consider.

While the dead of *Cré na Cille* are not existentially curious, it is important to note that their mundane chatter is juxtaposed throughout the text by speeches of the ‘Trump of the Graveyard’, a disembodied voice whose lyrical, metaphysical monologues can be found at the beginning of six of the novel's ten interludes.<sup>23</sup> It is impossible to say from where, exactly, the trumpet is speaking, but it is notable that the characters are unable to interact with it in any meaningful way – they show no signs of hearing the trumpet's proclamations nor are they able to answer its calls. In contrast to what Radvan Markus calls “the earthy, indeed carnivalesque, speech of the graveyard's inhabitants”, the trumpet uses elevated, lofty language.<sup>24</sup> Ailbhe Ó Corráin aptly compares the trumpet's language usage with the rest of the characters from *Cré na Cille*, writing “The language is more lyrical, being dense with strange and extended metaphor. The vocabulary is more eclectic and the syntax rather more complex. We are here presented with a more elevated literary register”.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ó Cathasaigh, “A Vision to Realise,” 21.

<sup>23</sup> Anachronistic negative connotations to Donald Trump aside, a footnote to the text tells the reader that the word ‘trump’ is a “Poetic or archaic word for ‘trumpet,’ as in ‘last trump’ or ‘trump of doom’.” Mac Con Iomaire and Robinson in Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 65.

<sup>24</sup> Radvan Markus, “The Carnivalesque Against Entropy: Máirtín Ó Cadhain's *Cré na Cille*,” *Litteraria Pragensia*, 28, no. 55 (2018): 63.

<sup>25</sup> Ailbhe Ó Corráin, “Grave Comedy: A Study of *Cré na Cille* by Máirtín Ó Cadhain,” in *Anglo-Irish and Irish Literature Aspects of Language and Culture*, ed. Birgit Bramsbäck and Martin Croghan (Uppsala: 1998), 144.

The trumpet's monologues follow a similar pattern each time: beginning with the proclamation "I am the Trump of the Graveyard. Let my voice be heard! It must be heard ..." the trumpet then describes the bleakness of the graveyard (i.e. "There is neither time nor life in the Graveyard. There is neither brightness nor darkness") before moving on to praise life above ground and commenting on growth and fertility (i.e. "The springtide is pulsing constantly in the channels of the shore. The meadow is as if a can of green milk had been spilt on its grass") and the speech invariably ends with the natural processes of death and decay defeating life (i.e. "Gaiety and gambolling give way to grumbling and groaning. Weakness is driving out strength").<sup>26</sup>

The meaning of the role that the trumpet plays in *Cré na Cille* has been widely debated by critics, and it is certainly still open to interpretation. However, I tend to favor a view held by a few critics, most notably Pádraig de Paor and Radvan Markus, both of whom view the trumpet as a sort of harbinger of death. De Paor even goes so far as to write that the trumpet is "something of a personification of the Second Law of Thermodynamics, which claims it is the force of entropy itself which increases with the passage of time, and from which nothing in our entire universe will escape."<sup>27</sup> Basically the trumpet will, slowly but surely, eradicate all signs of life. In this analysis, the trumpet certainly plays a pivotal role in the text. And while the 'time' of the novel is listed as 'Eternity'" – which seems to imply that the characters will remain in their graves, chatting, forever – the forces of entropy are quietly at work throughout the text. At one point, a minor character named Cóilí who has not spoken in a while is found to be literally decomposing, although the rest of the graveyard does not dwell on the fact – "Oh, so that fellow

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<sup>26</sup> Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 65-66. This reoccurring pattern found in the trumpet's monologue has been pointed out before, most notably by Radvan Markus in his essay "The Carnavalesque against Entropy", 63.

<sup>27</sup> de Paor, "Ends, Endings and Endlessness in *Cré na Cille*, 76.

is totally decomposed, Muraed” says Caitríona before moving onto more immediate concerns.<sup>28</sup>

Later in the novel, Caitríona’s grave becomes infested with earthworms with the clear implication being that the earthworms are slowly consuming her corpse. But, again, the characters do not dwell on the situation and Ó Cadhain even utilizes it as an opportunity to inject some black humor into the proceedings, with Caitríona complaining “Our lady knows I have difficulty in hearing any new story here. That earthworm, God blast it! Nowhere would suit it but to go into my earhole!”<sup>29</sup>

When the trumpet makes its first appearance in the text, it is as an all-powerful figure, proclaiming “For I am every voice that was, that is and that will be. I was the first voice in the formlessness of the universe. I am the last voice that will be heard in the dust of Armageddon. I was the muffled voice of the first embryo in the first womb.” Despite the trumpet’s omnipotent assertions, it is not intended to be God; however, numerous critics have noted the Biblical suggestiveness of the trumpet’s language, with Ó Corráin writing that “we may be reminded, for instance, of the traditional Christian figure of the trumpeter who heralds the last judgment”.<sup>30</sup> Markus makes a similar declaration while also explaining the difference between the trumpet’s omnipotence and that of the Judeo-Christian God: “In contrast to the Biblical God, however, it does not offer the slightest prospect of salvation, but rather announces the end of all things in gradual decay.”<sup>31</sup> Yet the trumpet does not remain almighty throughout *Cré na Cille*: its voice peters out and is replaced by short snippets of dialogue between two unnamed voices. Although it is certainly debatable as to who the voices belong to, Markus’s assertion that the voices “can be seen as representing the principles of life and death” is reasonable given the content of the

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<sup>28</sup> Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 109.

<sup>29</sup> Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 194.

<sup>30</sup> Ó Corráin, “Grave Comedy,” 145.

<sup>31</sup> Markus, “The Carnavalesque against Entropy”, 64.



exchange (i.e. one voice [presumably life] says “Southerly aspect, brightness, love, red of rose and the maiden’s laugh are mine” to which the other voice [presumably death] replies “Mine are northerly aspect, darkness, gloom, root system that send growth to rose leaf, and arterial system that brings the gangrenous blood of depression to erupt on the smiling cheek”).<sup>32</sup> *Cré na Cille* ends in this way – with a seeming equilibrium between life and death – which could be interpreted as good news for those dead and buried and their prospects of remaining wholly intact and earthworm free in their graves, but could, on a larger scale, also have implications for the life above ground and the Irish-speaking community the dead were part of. It seems as if the trumpet – while maybe not having been fully defeated – has at least been kept in check by the injection of ‘life’ as a counterbalance; although, given the ‘eternal’ setting of the text, it would not be beyond the realm of possibility for the trumpet to reemerge at a point in the distant future, once more preaching its message of omnipotent entropy and destroying the voice of ‘life’ in the process.

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In stark contrast to *Cré na Cille*, the characters of *Lincoln in the Bardo* are physically free – they are not bound to their coffins, instead their ghosts can leave their graves and traipse around the cemetery at night, invisible to the real world; although, in a way similar to Dracula, they must return to their tombs before sunrise, with one character describing this nightly ritual: “we dashed off for our respective home-places, and situated ourselves squeamishly within our sick-forms, eyes closed or averted, so as not to see what those foul things had become”.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, while the characters’ ghostly forms can move around the graveyard freely at night, it

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<sup>32</sup> Markus, “The Carnavalesque against Entropy” 68; Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 246.

<sup>33</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo* (New York: Random House, 2017), 338-339.

is important to note that the dual processes of decay and decomposition remain hard at work, devouring their earthly remains. It is also important to remark that (most of) the characters cannot actually leave the graveyard – the main section of Oak Hill Cemetery is bordered by “the dreaded iron fence”, “that noxious limit beyond which we could not venture” according to Roger Bevins – so, while the dead of *Lincoln in the Bardo* have far more physical freedom than those in *Cré na Cille*, there is a limit to that freedom.<sup>34</sup>

The dead of *Lincoln in the Bardo* are buried in the very-real Oak Hill Cemetery, yet the space which they are inhabiting cannot be said to be very ‘earthly’, particularly from a scientific point of view. Aside from the characters’ ability to physically leave their graves – a trio of men nicknamed the Three Bachelors are even able to fly – numerous supernatural occurrences support the idea that Saunders has created a space that is substantially *more* than your typical cemetery. For instance, when the characters exit their graves and pour into the cemetery each night to mix and mingle, they do so while their physical appearances manifest in bizarre and unique ways. Nearly each character’s person is commented upon by Saunders and this provides him with plenty of opportunities to delight with his imaginative descriptions. Memorably there is the integral character of Hans Vollman, who died on the day that he was set to finally consummate his marriage to his much younger, attractive wife; as a result, Vollman comically walks around the cemetery with a massive erection: “Quite naked Member swollen to the size of ... It bounced as he ... Quite naked indeed ... How could he walk around and talk with such a nasty – ” remarks little Willie Lincoln with wonder.<sup>35</sup> When another key character, the Reverend Everly Thomas, is first introduced into the novel, his friend describes his

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<sup>34</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 36.

<sup>35</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 28.

appearance by saying he “arrived, as he always arrives, at a hobbling sprint, eyebrows arched high, looking behind himself anxiously, hair sticking straight up, mouth in a perfect O of terror”.<sup>36</sup> Aside from being entertaining, each character’s physical appearance provides the reader with a key insight into that character, as it quickly becomes obvious that their ghostly bodies have become an externalization of their most crucial emotional problems and obsessions from back on earth – another key example of this being the minor character of Mrs. Ellis, who is haunted by the idea of her children having to live without her parental influence and thus, in the afterlife is “always surrounded by three gelatinous orbs floating about her person, each containing a likeness of one of her daughters. At times these orbs grew to extreme size, and would bear down upon her, and crush out her blood and other fluids”.<sup>37</sup>

When darkness falls and the dead emerge from their tombs, they are, of course, invisible to the real world and any living humans still inside the cemetery’s ground. However, the characters are able to interact with the real world to a certain degree (and it is implied that animals are somewhat cognizant of the ghosts’ existence, with Vollman commenting at one point “two slothful winter birds glared at us as we passed” and Bevins adding “birds being distrustful of our ilk”).<sup>38</sup> In addition, the characters are able to ‘enter’ the bodies of the living and thus hear their unfettered thoughts. This remarkable phenomenon (and its various consequences) is explored later, at various points, in the thesis, but it is still important to note here because it constitutes an important difference between the two texts, as the deceased in *Cré na Cille* seem completely unable to interact with the living in any meaningful way.

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<sup>36</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 28.

<sup>37</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 78.

<sup>38</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 127.

While the Tibetan Buddhist concept of the bardo is never explicitly mentioned in the text apart from the title, it bears a key influence on the shape of the novel. According to Oxford University Press, the bardo (or *antarābhava* in Sanskrit) is “in Tibetan Buddhism, the state after death and before rebirth.”<sup>39</sup> The *Tibetan Book of the Dead* provides a little more illumination, commenting upon the importance of this liminal state in the Buddhist tradition: “since consciousness is said to possess certain heightened qualities during this period, there is a potential to achieve liberation, or at the very least a favorable rebirth, at various key stages as this state is traversed.”<sup>40</sup> Therefore, in the most basic of senses, the bardo is a transitional state between life and rebirth, in which one is (potentially) able to achieve enlightenment. While the concept is infinitely more complex and nuanced (and various schools of Buddhism have different understandings of the bardo), for the purpose of this chapter this simple definition will suffice.

One of the most fascinating things about Saunders merging a 19<sup>th</sup> century Washington, D.C. area cemetery with the Tibetan bardo is the fact that none of the characters are Buddhist, thus resulting in the predictable outcome that they have no clue that they are in the bardo in the first place.<sup>41</sup> Placing Christians (whether pious or not) in the bardo creates a dynamic tension that is unique to the text, as the characters continually struggle to make sense of their surroundings – it is almost as if they are attempting to open a locked box without possessing the key (or even knowing that a key to the box exists). It is this ignorance that likely explains why the bardo is never specifically mentioned in the text. At points, however, the characters do seem to intrinsically understand where they are, even if they cannot name the place and even if that

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<sup>39</sup> *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, s.v. “Bardo”, 2000 ed.

<sup>40</sup> *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, trans. Gyurme Dorje (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 480.

<sup>41</sup> While the dead do not make it a matter of importance to talk about Christianity, it is safe to assume that the majority of Saunders’s characters are far more familiar with the Church and its teachings than the practice of Buddhism.

understanding is influenced by traditional Christian beliefs. An example of this is found in one of Reverend Thomas's monologues in which he reflects on the situation of the entire deceased community: "All is done. We are shades, immaterial, and since that judgement pertains to what we did (or did not do) in that previous (material) realm, correction is now forever beyond our means. Our work there is finished; we only await payment."<sup>42</sup> This statement can be interpreted in two ways: the first being, clearly, that the Reverend Thomas believes that he and the other dead are awaiting judgment from God, and that there is nothing that can be done in their purgatorial afterlife to change God's decision on their eternal soul; the second interpretation regards the bardo and the idea that what the characters are inhabiting is a liminal state, that they are hovering between life and death, and that it will soon be decided whether they are reborn into a different body or achieve enlightenment – even though Reverend Thomas is unaware that he is in the bardo, he is still able to verbalize the concept. But, as we will see shortly, a key difference between the two belief systems is that in the bardo – at least the bardo of Saunders's creation – the characters are able to actively change their fate, thereby redeeming themselves.

In *Cré na Cille*, the characters seem to passively accept their death – they are not happy about their passing, but they do not overtly question it – whereas the characters in *Lincoln in the Bardo* continually reject the very idea of their death. This is most notably seen in the diction of Hans Vollman, who creates a new language as a means to avoid using words synonymous with death; but it seems very unlikely that the characters would realize the bardo for what it is, even if they were to acknowledge the simple fact that they are dead.<sup>43</sup> Just as the characters are unable to recognize that they are in the bardo, but still manage to navigate its quirks and rules, I believe

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<sup>42</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 193.

<sup>43</sup> A deeper exploration of Vollman's language usage can be found in the next chapter.

that a reader who is completely unaware of the philosophical significance of the setting of *Lincoln in the Bardo* can still glean a lot from the text. Themes like redemption and the transience of life are universal and leap off of the page, regardless of the reader's knowledge of Tibetan Buddhism. However, it is undeniable that even a somewhat cursory understanding of the bardo leads to a much deeper and more nuanced reading of the text. It would be wrong to call *Lincoln in the Bardo* a religious novel, but its clear Buddhist underpinnings constitute another key difference between it and *Cré na Cille*, a text which, as mentioned above, steadfastly refuses to engage with religion in any substantial way.

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The afterlife depicted in *Cré na Cille* is almost entirely static. Bound to their graves, verbal communication is the only means by which the characters have to pass the time and therefore, unsurprisingly, language becomes an essential part of their existence – Radvan Markus even comments that “all the instances of verbal fighting bring liveliness to the graveyard and thus have the power to stave off the decomposing power of entropy, as announced by the trumpet”.<sup>44</sup> In a sense, lively language gives life to the dead in *Cré na Cille*. In comparison, the bardo of Saunders's creation is a far more physically active place, as previously mentioned in this chapter. This freedom of movement is crucial in that it allows the novel's main plot to come to fruition. In Saunders's vision of the bardo, the afterlife has (to say the least) a disconcerting relationship with children: basically, if a youth lingers for too long, the bardo will ensnare them there, torturing them eternally.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Markus, “The Carnavalesque against Entropy” 67.

<sup>45</sup> “These young ones are not meant to tarry” says Roger Bevins by way of explanation. Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 31.

Problems arise when Willie Lincoln, unwilling to leave his loving father behind, becomes reluctant to leave the cemetery. It is at this point that *Lincoln in the Bardo* diverges from its historical focus, instead shifting into something resembling a thriller by Mark Z. Danielewski or Shirley Jackson, as the cemetery literally comes to life and tries to trap Willie. Bevins and Vollman describe how this chilling process begins:

looking over, my heart sank. The roof around him [Willie] had liquified, and he appeared to be sitting in a gray-white puddle ... From out of the puddle, a vine-like tendrill emerged ... Thickening as it approached the boy, it flowed, cobra-like, over the juncture at which his calves crossed ... Reaching to brush it away, I found it stiff, more stone than snake ... A chilling development ... The beginning of the end.<sup>46</sup>

A large part of the rest of the novel concerns Bevins's and Vollman's (and, eventually, the rest of the graveyards') frantic effort to save Willie from "eternal enslavement".<sup>47</sup> Yet, these scenes become far more than just standard literary thriller-fare, as they provide Saunders with a platform to dig into some of the novel's key themes, namely redemption.

In *Cré na Cille*, the graveyard appears to be all that exists after death and all of the community's dead end up there – there is no indication that the cemetery is purgatory or any sort of way station leading to some higher place. In contrast, not all of those buried in Oak Hill Cemetery remain there (at least in terms of their spirit/soul/consciousness); it turns out that the dead can leave the liminal cemetery via something coined the 'matterlightblooming phenomenon', in which a character basically explodes and their consciousness departs the graveyard. Reaching back to the definition of the bardo, it is clear that the matterlightblooming

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<sup>46</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 110.

<sup>47</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 104.

phenomenon reflects that a specific character's time in the bardo has come to an end; however, Saunders never explicitly states whether the matterlightblooming phenomenon is a signal that the character's spirit has achieved liberation or whether it simply means that their soul has entered into the cycle of rebirth. Plausibly, it could differ on a case by case basis, depending on the state of the character's soul. However, I choose to interpret the matterlightblooming phenomenon as something exceedingly positive, likely linked to the achievement of enlightenment. There are two pieces of evidence that can be cited to support this claim. The first concerns the dead who do not appear in the novel, for the simple matter that they passed through the cemetery very quickly, choosing to be matterlightbloomed straight away. At one point in *Lincoln in the Bardo*, Vollman and Bevins are 'walk-skimming' through the graveyard, racing past the sundry tombstones of those who did not linger in the bardo; Vollman first admits that "these were, it must be conceded, in the majority, outnumbering our ilk by perhaps an order of magnitude" before stating that they "had lingered, if at all, for only the briefest of moments, so completely satisfactory had they found their tenure in that previous place."<sup>48</sup> It would seem that those who had lived a full and fulfilling life on earth are able to pass through the bardo quite easily, unafraid to encounter whatever comes next. The second reason is nearly the inverse of the first, and it concerns the dead who remain in the bardo. These characters, who comprise the key personages in the text, cannot be said to have lived satisfying lives. This is personified by the bizarre, never-positive physical appearances manifested by each of them and by the fact that they are perpetually ruminating over *something*, as Bevins explains: "to stay, one must deeply and continuously dwell upon one's primary reason for staying; even to the exclusion of all else."<sup>49</sup> Whether the matterlightblooming phenomenon is a signal of liberation in the Buddhist sense or not, it is

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<sup>48</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 142-143.

<sup>49</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 255.



clearly a positive step in the right direction for the dead, as it seems to happen only to those with a clear and healthy consciousness.

The concept of the matterlightblooming phenomenon can now be tied back to the character's quest to save Willie Lincoln. One of the most disturbing visions created by Saunders concerns the character of Elise Traynor, a girl who passed away at fourteen and lingered too long in the graveyard, eventually becoming stuck in the bardo. When Traynor first arrived in the afterlife, she "uninterruptedly manifested as a spinning young girl in a summer frock of continually shifting color", but when she is introduced into the text – now being continually tortured by the bardo – she "lay as usual, trapped against, and part of, the fence, manifesting at that moment as a sort of horrid blackened furnace ... [and then] she rapidly transmuted into the fallen bridge, the vulture, the large dog, the terrible hag gorging on black cake" and so on and so on.<sup>50</sup> Initially she seems to serve as a cautionary tale as well as the impetus for the characters to save Willie Lincoln, upping the dramatic stakes – *look what will happen to poor little Willie if he lingers in the bardo for too long!* It is not until later in the novel that Traynor's character takes on a greater degree of significance, as it becomes clear that the trio of Vollman, Bevins and Thomas hold a degree of culpability for her situation:

These memories of Miss Traynor depressed us.

The Reverend Everly Thomas

Bringing to our minds, as they did, the shame of that long-ago night.

Roger Bevins

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<sup>50</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 36-37.

On which we had abandoned her.

Hans Vollman

Stumbling away, heads lowered.

Roger Bevins

Tacitly assenting to her doom.

The Reverend Everly Thomas

As she descended.

Hans Vollman

Not only is the trio stuck in the bardo because of negative experiences that transpired on earth, but their actions in the bardo seem to have *furthered* their despair, thereby decreasing the likelihood of them ever experiencing the matterlightblossoming phenomenon. Given this immense burden of guilt, it is no wonder that they are so keen on saving Willie's soul. It was mentioned earlier, but it is a point worth repeating: the Reverend Thomas, likely viewing the communities' afterlife situation as a bizarre sort of Christian purgatory, does not believe that he (or any of the other characters) are able to change a thing about the state of their souls, as evidenced by the statement "for any of us *here*, it is too late for any alteration of course. All is done".<sup>51</sup> The Reverend Thomas is correct in the sense that it is impossible for him to literally go back and change anything that happened on earth, whether good or bad; yet, he is incorrect in the assumption that he cannot change anything in the afterlife.

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<sup>51</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 193.

As the novel is reaching its climax, the Reverend Thomas is faced with a critical, dramatic decision: become eternally enslaved in the bardo or try his luck with what comes after the matterlightblooming phenomenon; trying to save Willie, he unintentionally becomes “bundled [with Willie] tightly together within a rapidly solidifying new carapace”, a carapace that is composed of demonic beings that aim to trap the pair in the bardo.<sup>52</sup> In reality, the decision is actually an easy one for the Reverend and he chooses to leave the bardo and take his chances in the next phase of existence. The upshot is that the Reverend’s departure creates a hole in the carapace from which Vollman and Bevins are able to free Willie. Almost as important is what the characters find inside the carapace, as described by Vollman:

The imprint of the Reverend’s face, which had not, I am happy to say, in those final instants, reverted back to the face we had so long associated with him (badly frightened, eyebrows high, the mouth a perfect O of terror), but, rather, his countenance now conveyed a sense of tentative hopefulness – as if he were going into that unknown place content that he had, at any rate, while in this place, done all that he could.<sup>53</sup>

The significance seems clear: in saving Willie’s life, the Reverend has freed himself of his past failures, thereby redeeming his character. The expression of terror on his face dropped away – to be replaced by a tranquil expression of ‘tentative hopefulness’ – and he is now able to experience the matterlightblooming phenomenon with a clear conscience.

After Willie Lincoln departs from the bardo, the only plot point that Saunders needs to resolve concerns Bevins and Vollman. Having ‘lost’ their friend the Reverend Thomas, they know that it is now, finally, their turn to leave the bardo, too. So off they go, on their own

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<sup>52</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 274.

<sup>53</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 276.

personal missions of redemption. They return to the unfortunate Traynor girl who is still trapped on the dreaded iron fence, this time manifesting as a sort of horrific train crash, and apologize “for our cowardice at the time of her initial doom ... which had always, in every minute since, gnawed at us ... our first huge failing ... our initial abandonment of the better nature we had brought with us from that previous place.”<sup>54</sup> Traynor, aware that the two men are set to leave the cemetery shortly, asks that they might conduct the matterlightblooming phenomenon right in front of her: “You might try ... Might at least try ... Do it here. Do it now Won’t you ... Blow this fuk cok ass ravage train up. Sir ... With yr going ... If you pls It mite free me Dont know Cant say for sure ... But have been so unhappy here so long.”<sup>55</sup> The men oblige and “the train exploded ... [and then] where the train had been, was now only the dreaded iron fence”.<sup>56</sup> Again, the significance of this moment seems clear: similarly to how the Reverend Thomas liberated his soul by sacrificing himself for Willie Lincoln, both Vollman and Bevins are able to redeem their (previously tormented) characters by freeing Elise Traynor from eternal damnation. Aside from serving as two prime examples of one of *Lincoln in the Bardo*’s most important themes – redemption – these instances also highlight another key difference between the afterlives in the two novels. In *Cré na Cille*, the dead are basically unable to change the elements of their character in the afterlife – sure, they may be able to pick up a new language, but the graveyard does not provide them with a platform from which to become *better* people. The characters remain stagnant throughout the text, lacking the ability to change for the better (or worse, for that matter). Meanwhile, as just illustrated, the afterlife of *Lincoln in the Bardo* does enable (perhaps

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<sup>54</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 331.

<sup>55</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 374.

<sup>56</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 334.

it even encourages) the dead to change and to continue evolving, as seen in the redemption of the Reverend Thomas, Vollman, and Bevins.

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It is clear that the graveyards depicted by Ó Cadhain and Saunders differ from one another in numerous ways. The dead of *Cré na Cille* seem destined to remain in their tombs forever (assuming that their boisterous language has truly defeated the entropic force of the trumpet), rehashing old feuds and fruitlessly attempting to boost their social status within the community. On the other hand, the deceased in *Lincoln in the Bardo* do not find themselves in an ‘eternal’ afterlife, but, instead, in a liminal space – one in which they retain the gift of physical movement – which provides them with the opportunity to improve the state of their soul, should they perform good, selfless deeds. But not withstanding these crucial differences, it should be stressed that both novels display a kind of metaphysics throughout: the subtle weaving of Tibetan Buddhist concepts into *Lincoln in the Bardo* and the entropic disembodied voice of the trumpet in *Cré na Cille*. Outlining the conditions of each graveyard provides an important framework and point of reference for the reader moving forward as we continue to explore how Ó Cadhain and Saunders both use the setting of the graveyard as a unique way to depict an entire community.

## Chapter Two: On Language and Bakhtin's Theory of Heteroglossia

“The Result was Cacophony”<sup>1</sup>

Mikhail Bakhtin, the Russian critic, coined the term heteroglossia in his essay “Discourse in the Novel”. It is a complicated and nuanced concept, yet heteroglossia will provide a helpful lens through which to analyze the language in these novels.

According to Bakhtin, one can take a national language (American English, Irish, Czech, etc.) and divide it and subdivide it into an almost endless number of groups and subgroups. While a national language may seem like a unified whole, that really is not the case; at any moment in time, it is easy to break a language down into more, hyper-specific groups. Bakhtin provides a great number of examples of what he calls “the internal stratification of any singular national language”, writing that “social dialects, characteristic group behavior, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups”, etc. are all various types of speech of, seemingly, the same language.<sup>2</sup> These are not the only subgroups of a national language and, of course, most of the groups can be further stratified; for instance, Bakhtin writes later in that essay that “the language of the lawyer, the doctor, the business man, the politician, the public education teacher” are a few of (the almost infinite) types of professional jargons.<sup>3</sup> Heteroglossia, in the Bakhtinian sense, is the dizzying variety of language at use, at any given moment of time, in a society. Heteroglossia is the realization that a construction worker, a

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<sup>1</sup> Quote from The Reverend Everly Thomas in George Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo* (New York: Random House, 2017), 205.

<sup>2</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1983), 288-89.

<sup>3</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 289.

doctor, and a professional athlete inhabit – if only slightly – different linguistic worlds, and it is the reason that I speak one way to my parents, another way to my closest friends, and a third way to someone in a position of authority like a police officer or a professor.

In “Discourse in the Novel”, Bakhtin attempts to differentiate the novel from other literary styles, specifically poetry. To Bakhtin, the language of the poet is immune from the effects of heteroglossia. The poet is an artist completely in command of his or her craft, their words are their words alone, and, in the hands of a true poet “the finished language is an obedient organ, fully adequate to the author’s intention”.<sup>4</sup> While Bakhtin’s strict divide between the language of the poet and the language of the prose writer is based on a narrow concept of poetry and might seem dated, it contributes to a highly original and inspiring definition of the novel. In Bakhtin’s view, the novel is the ideal art form to display heteroglossia; whereas the poet uses a “unitary and singular” language, the novelist has a plethora of distinctive possibilities at their disposal – even the simplest of novels can contain a wide range of voices.<sup>5</sup> Writers use heteroglossia – and the endless variations there within – to carefully build a structure, a structure that once completed becomes a novel. Bakhtin even provides his own definition of the novel, writing that it “can be defined as a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized”.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the definition of the novel is two-fold. First, the novel must contain heteroglossia, thus allowing the author to depict various speech types present within a national language, while simultaneously allowing these stratified languages to dynamically interact with one another. Second, these voices must be artistically organized – for if they do not, in Bakhtin’s words,

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<sup>4</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 286.

<sup>5</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 286.

<sup>6</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 262.

“combine to form a structured artistic system” we would be left with a jumble of disparate voices, not an artistically whole piece of literature.<sup>7</sup>

Bakhtin provides a list of the five main ways – which he calls “compositional-stylistic unities” – in which heteroglossia typically enters the novel. The list will be applied to *Cré na Cille* and *Lincoln in the Bardo*, and is as follows:

- 1) Direct authorial literary-artistic narration (in all its diverse variants);
- 2) Stylization of the various forms of oral everyday narration (*skaz* in Russian);
- 3) Stylization of the various forms of semiliterary (written) everyday narration (the letter, the diary, etc.);
- 4) Various forms of literary but extra-artistic authorial speech (moral, philosophical or scientific statements, oratory, ethnographic descriptions, memoranda and so forth);
- 5) The stylistically individualized speech of characters.<sup>8</sup>

One of the key offerings of the novel – part of what sets it apart from other, more limited literary art forms – is that heteroglossia allows the novel to give birth to a vast world, encompassing different social spheres.<sup>9</sup> Rather than an interest in *how* heteroglossia enters a novel, Bakhtin is driven by a fascination with how the resulting “multiplicity of social voices” combine, merge, and flow apart at the behest of the author and how these stratified voices and languages coalesce to form a fictional world.<sup>10</sup> Both *Lincoln in the Bardo* and *Cré na Cille* are stylistically brilliant novels – composed almost entirely of dialogue – which rely heavily on language, thus each author is dependent on heteroglossia to make their respective visions a reality. Bakhtin wrote that

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<sup>7</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 262.

<sup>8</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 262.

<sup>9</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 263.

<sup>10</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 263.



heteroglossia “is the basic distinguishing feature of the stylistics of the novel”, meaning that part of every novel’s uniqueness and appeal can be traced to heteroglossia.<sup>11</sup> However, it would not be outrageous to claim that heteroglossia is more vital to *Lincoln in the Bardo* and *Cré na Cille* than it is to most novels; it is the stunning assortment of speech types and speech styles given to the characters who populate these two texts that allow their authors to create such full and vibrant worlds.

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In comparison to *Cré na Cille* – which is composed entirely of spoken dialogue and therefore more stylistically akin to a radio or stage drama – the ‘stylistic unities’ found in *Lincoln in the Bardo* are far more plentiful. At its essence, the novel is comprised of two distinct types of text: written historical documents from a wide collection of sources, in addition to dialogue between the characters.

We will begin with the historical documents, which appear throughout the novel and are used by Saunders as a way to supply historical context for the action unfolding in the graveyard.<sup>12</sup> At this point, though, focus will be specifically placed on the style of these texts seeing as they provide a tremendous amount of heteroglossic examples for potential analysis. The historical sources – many of which are real, some of which are products of Saunders’s imagination – first appear in the novel’s second chapter. Initially they are disorientating to the reader, because each is presented as a stand-alone quotation that is followed by a citation, but their function quickly becomes clear: these collections of quotes work together to effectively

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<sup>11</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 262.

<sup>12</sup> A deeper analysis of the importance that these sources play in the novel can be found in the following chapter.

create a vivid depiction of, specifically, Washington D.C. and, on a larger scale, the entire United States of America in 1862.

Saunders, playing the role of bricoleur, uses a huge number of sources, but also a large quantity of *types* of sources – including memoirs, eyewitness accounts, collections of letters, essays, and even a cemetery night watchman’s logbook in addition to, unsurprisingly, numerous works of historiography – to create these detailed historical tableaux.<sup>13</sup>

Above, I noted the five “basic types of compositional-stylistic unities into which the novelistic whole usually breaks down”; of the five, I believe that the third from the list is the most relevant to the texts that appear in the historical source sections of *Lincoln in the Bardo*.<sup>14</sup> The third compositional-stylistic unity – which Bakhtin categorizes as “stylization of the various forms of semiliterary (written) everyday narration (the letter, the diary, etc.)” – is prevalent throughout these passages, notably in the fictional night watchman’s logbook.<sup>15</sup> These entries, penned by a man named Jack Manders, are jotted down over the course of the single night in which the novel takes place. Though not a main character, Manders does serve a critical role in the novel as he is the only living character who interacts with Abraham Lincoln over the course of the text, thus Manders, quite surprisingly, offers the ‘proof’ that Abraham Lincoln, in the novel, really visited the graveyard and spent time in the crypt. Manders is depicted as an honest,

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<sup>13</sup> The titles and authenticity of the texts, in order: the real “Behind the Scenes or Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House,” by Elizabeth Keckley (8); the fictional “Eyewitness to History: The Lincoln White House,” edited by Stone Hilyard; account of Sophie Lenox, maid and account of Paul Riles, White House Guard (48 and 180, respectively); the fictional “Country Letters to President Lincoln,” compiled and edited by Josephine Banner and Evelyn Dressman; letter from Robert Hansworthy, Boonsboro, Maryland (154) and the real “Dear Mr. Lincoln,” edited by Harold Holzer (233); the real “Essay on the Death of Willie Lincoln,” by Mathilde Williams, curator, Peabody Library Association (292); the fictional Watchman’s logbook, 1860-78, Oak Hill Cemetery, entry by Jack Manders, night of February 25· 1862, quoted by arrangement with Mr. Edward Sansibel (65); the real “Reveille in Washington, 1860-1865,” by Margaret Leech and the real “Twenty Days,” by Dorothy Meserve Kunhardt and Philip B. Kunhardt Jr. (8 and 9, respectively).

<sup>14</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 262.

<sup>15</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 262.

humble, family man. These characteristics are captured in his first entry, when he admits to having fallen asleep on the job, writing “also I was somewhat groggy it being late as mentioned above and having given myself over yesterday to some fun in the park with my own children Philip Mary & Jack Jr. thereby being somewhat tired and I admit dozing a bit at your desk Tom” (64).<sup>16</sup> Aside from the content of his message and what it illuminates – that Manders literally works the graveyard shift, that he is tired at work because he was playing in the park with his children the previous afternoon, and that he is an honest enough man to admit to his boss that he fell asleep while on duty – the text is also important because of the *way* it was written. Manders’s writing, rendered by Saunders, is a believable representation of what a night watchman’s logbook entry, late in the evening, might look like. Manders does not use commas, only periods at the end of paragraphs which, unsurprisingly, leads to incredibly long run-on sentences. It also gives the impression that he is recording his thoughts, as fast as possible, in a stream-of-consciousness way. Similarly, Manders abbreviates words like “Pres” for ‘President’ and “yr” for ‘your’ and randomly uses ampersands, likely in an attempt at brevity. But, despite the lack of punctuation throughout Manders’s log entries, Saunders does not give the impression that Manders is feeble-minded or completely uneducated. Manders has a decent to good vocabulary and his last entry mentions his family’s cook, “Mrs Alberts”, which would seem to suggest at least a modicum of wealth and social status for his family.<sup>17</sup> It seems obvious to acknowledge that a logbook entry made by a night watchman would be stylistically dissimilar to (amongst other things) an academic essay, but it is an important point to make because it provides a useful

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<sup>16</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 64.

<sup>17</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 341.

example of the “internal stratification of any single national language” and how there are so many different mini-languages within a single langue.<sup>18</sup>

Based on the language of his logbook entries, Manders can be seen as a representation of a respectable, dependable middle-class American circa 1862. In contrast, Saunders uses historical collections of letters to depict an entirely different segment of the American population: the rural and uneducated, the majority of whom strongly detest Lincoln and curse him with a ferocity that would make Ó Cadhain proud. Like the logbook entries, these texts work on a number of levels. First, they are an interesting way to provide historical context to the reader: it is Saunders’s way of showing how unpopular Lincoln and the abolitionists were to many Americans. Second, the particular heteroglossia found within the letters – their copious spelling and grammatical errors, their curses and unabashed racism – provides more instances of stratified language, a clever way for Saunders to introduce another element of 1862 American society into the novel.

Here is a letter, addressed to the President, from a fictional man named Robert Hansworthy of Boonsboro, Maryland:

How miny more ded do you attend to make sir afore you is done? One minit there was our litle Nate on that bridge with a fishpole and ware is that boy now? And who is it called him hither, in that Notice he saw down to Orbys, wellsir, that was your name he saw upon it “Abaham Lincoln.”<sup>19</sup>

Obviously, the spelling and grammar in Hansworthy’s letter is atrocious – the language of a man unfamiliar with a pen and paper – but its sentiment is actually quite devastating: clearly,

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<sup>18</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 288-289.

<sup>19</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 154.

Hansworthy's son died in battle and now the father is heartbroken, grieving for his lost son and has decided to blame Lincoln for his loss. Another letter, purportedly from "a New York infantryman to Lincoln", is succinct and brutal in its racist reasoning for wanting to avoid the war: "We did not & will not Agree to fite for the Neygar, for whom we do not give a wit".<sup>20</sup> Another letter, this one coming from a real collection of letters titled "Dear Mr. Lincoln" and edited by the scholar Harold Holzer, contains maledictions and ludicrous turns of phrase directed at Lincoln, which would actually be quite humorous in their extravagance if not for their blatant racism:

If you don't Resign we are going to put a spider in your dumpling and play the Devil with you you god or mighty god damn sundde of a bith go to hell and buss my Ass suck my prick and call my Bolics your uncle Dick god dam a fool and goddam Abe Lincoln who would like you goddam you excuse me for using such hard words with you but you need it you are nothing but a goddam Black nigger.<sup>21</sup>

Another letter, included in Holzer's book, is remarkable for its vitriol and complete lack of imagination:

Old Abe Lincoln

God damn your god damned old Hellfired god damned soul to hell god damn you and goddam your god damned family's god damned hellfired god damned soul to hell and god damnation god damn them and god damn your god damn friends to hell god damn their god damned souls to damnation god damn them.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 234.

<sup>21</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 233.

<sup>22</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 235.

The language systems found in these letters are another prime example of the stratification of language discussed by Bakhtin, and they are noteworthy in just how different they are from Manders's logbook entries. Whereas Manders wrote in the specific style of a night watchman hurriedly writing a report while on duty, these 'country letters' are a completely separate subgenre of American-English – misspellings abound, racism is shameless, intelligence is questionable and humanity (at times) can be glimpsed.

Other instances of stratified (written) language enter the novel as Saunders incorporates more traditional historical texts into these sections. All of these historical texts bring their own specific heteroglossic traits to the proceedings and they work together to create the unique artistic whole of the novel. As an example, the second chapter of *Lincoln in the Bardo* is just two short pages long, yet it contains three separate quotations, all from authentic historical sources: the first from a memoir/autobiography, the second from a Pulitzer Prize winning military history and the third, also, from a work of historical non-fiction.<sup>23</sup> The purpose of this specific chapter is to provide information about the death of Willie Lincoln, i.e. that the president and first lady hosted a lavish state dinner while "Willie was burning with fever ... He drew every breath with difficulty".<sup>24</sup> Upon reading the quotations, the most obvious point to make is how completely different they are from Manders's logbook entries or the collections of letters disparaging Lincoln. This is written language that is polished, highly intelligent and meant for publication – there are no spelling errors, diatribes or grammatical mistakes. Consider, for example, the first quote from *Twenty Days* by Kunhardt and Kunhardt Jr.: "Willie was burning with fever on the night of the fifth, as his mother dressed for the party. He drew every breath with difficulty. She

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<sup>23</sup> Again, the texts, in order: *Behind the Scenes or Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House*, by Elizabeth Keckley; "Reveille in Washington, 1860-1865," by Margaret Leech; "Twenty Days," by Dorothy Meserve Kunhardt and Philip B. Kunhardt Jr.

<sup>24</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 9.

could see that his lungs were congested and she was frightened”.<sup>25</sup> The passage is excellently written, yet the language is not lofty or overly poetic. It is descriptive, yet remains firmly within bounds of what can be expected of a historical non-fiction text. The language in the quotation from Elizabeth Keckley’s memoir is stratified in itself, because it is a mixture of voices, mostly comprised of quotations remembered by Keckley, such as “‘You Know,’ Mrs. Lincoln said to me ...” but also Keckley’s commentary on the proceedings such as “The question was decided, and arrangements were made for the first reception.”<sup>26</sup> This combining of direct quotations with commentary and personal reflections would seem to be typical of an autobiography.

The inclusion of more academic-minded texts into the historical source sections of *Lincoln in the Bardo* serves to further flesh out these chapters, to make them more vibrant and realistic in their portrayal of 1862 America. These sections of the novel are intended to provide historical background to the reader – to furnish the reader with the knowledge of what is happening above ground, specifically regarding Willie’s death, but also to deliver a larger-scale commentary on American society at this time. Saunders could have easily written these historical sections himself, using his own authorial voice or he could have chosen a single historical source from which to draw from, but he did not because this would have created a limited picture of the United States during the Civil War era. Instead, he chose to draw from a medley of far-flung sources (while simultaneously inventing others) and subsequently benefited from the wealth of heteroglossic differences inherent within those texts.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 9.

<sup>26</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 8.

<sup>27</sup> A more in-depth look at Civil War America (and American society, in general, circa 1862) can be found in the next chapter.

As mentioned earlier, the second distinctive type of text found in *Lincoln in the Bardo* is the dialogue of the characters. In Bakhtin's list of the compositional-stylistic unities found within a novel, the fifth is the "stylistically individualized speech of characters" and, indeed, the characters' discourse enables Saunders to introduce numerous instances of stratified language into the novel which, again, helps to create a realistic and wide-ranging image of American society during 1862.<sup>28</sup> A huge number of characters are given a voice by Saunders, each sui generis in their own way – a necessity, for if the characters had all spoken alike the novel would have been extremely tedious. Also tedious would be a complete list of the different characters highlighted in the novel, but just to give an idea of the variety of language populating the graveyard, here is a random list of some of the characters which appear: a gentleman who owned a printing press shop, a clergy man, a farmer, multiple slaves, a victim of sexual abuse, a teenager possessed by demons, a pair of drunken degenerates and the President of the United States – in fact, Charley Locke, in an article discussing the epic-scale of the *Lincoln in the Bardo* audiobook puts the exact number at 166 characters.<sup>29</sup> It is a wide cast of characters and each brings their own heteroglossic bounty to the table.

As touched upon earlier, the dialogue in *Cré na Cille* takes place entirely in the present, with the characters interacting with each other in 'real-time' on the page, although the corpses frequently utilize reported speech when referring to past events or telling stories to one another. In contrast, the characters in *Lincoln in the Bardo* seem to be narrating and commenting upon the

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<sup>28</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 262.

<sup>29</sup> Charley Locke, "Lincoln in the Bardo, George Saunders' 7-hour, 166 Person Audiobook, Feels Like a Movie," *Wired*, February 14, 2017, <https://www.wired.com/2017/02/george-saunders-bardo-white-house-audiobook/>. Those characters, in order, are: Hans Vollman; The Reverend Everly Thomas; Lance Durning; Elson Farwell and Litzie Wright and Thomas Havens; Vesper Johannes; Elise Traynor; Betsy and Eddie Baron; Abraham Lincoln.



events of the novel after the fact. A substantial part of the dialogue is, in fact, reported speech as in this quotation, attributed to the character of Hans Vollman:

Strange here, he said

Not strange, said Mr. Bevins. Not really.

One gets used to it, said the Reverend.

If one belongs here, said Mr. Bevins.

Which you don't, said the Reverend.

Hans Vollman<sup>30</sup>

Clearly, Vollman is recollecting an exchange that he was witness to between his two friends. Saunders presents the spoken sections of *Lincoln in the Bardo* as a carefully chosen collection of voices – each voice a stylistically unique one – which, together, work to tell a story. In fact, stylistically, the novel most closely resembles the popular contemporary genre of ‘oral history’ – but this chapter’s main focus is to analyze the spoken language of the characters in *Lincoln in the Bardo* and explore how it provides another gateway for heteroglossia to enter the text.<sup>31</sup>

The narrative core of the novel revolves around three men: Hans Vollman, Roger Bevins III and the Reverend Everly Thomas. They comprise a triumvirate that have become stalwarts in the graveyard, witnesses to hundreds of souls passing through and all sorts of nightly spectacles. At the end of the novel, after Vollman and Bevins have departed, one of the remaining residents

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<sup>30</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 117.

<sup>31</sup> The acknowledgement of the similarities shared by *Lincoln in the Bardo* and the genre of oral history have been made by the writer Merritt Moseley. See: Merritt Moseley, “*Lincoln in the Bardo*: Uh, NOT a Historical Novel,” May 16, 2019, <file:///C:/Users/Owner/Documents/Thesis/UH,%20Not%20a%20Historical%20Novel.pdf>.

of the graveyard comments with surprise, “Bevins and Vollman, two of our most long-standing and faithful residents: gone”, a comment that gives an idea of the lofty standing that the trio have within the cemetery.<sup>32</sup> The separate voices of the novel’s three de facto narrators are actually quite similar to one another. For the most part, their utterances are elegant yet unadorned – none of them speak in *such* a uniquely distinctive way that it diverts the reader’s attention (for long) from the novel’s plot. Now, that is not say that Vollman, Bevins and Thomas all speak exactly alike because they most certainly do not. Each has his own personal language that is realistically based on their character’s occupation and life history. We will start with the language used by Roger Bevins because his dialogue is the most inventive of the trio. Bevins arrived in the bardo after committing suicide; he was a closeted gay man – a societal impossibility in nineteenth century America, of course – and, after having his heart broken by his lover, he decided to end his life. He describes the moment by saying “I took a butcher knife to my room and, after writing a note to my parents ... and another to him [the ex-lover] ..., I slit my wrists rather savagely over a porcelain tub”.<sup>33</sup> But as he was bleeding out in the bathroom, he had an epiphany, an epiphany that life was worth living after all:

Only then (nearly out the door, so to speak) did I realize how unspeakably *beautiful* all of this was, how precisely engineered for our pleasure, and saw that I was on the brink of squandering a wondrous gift, the gift of being allowed, every day, to wander this vast sensual paradise, this grand marketplace lovingly stocked with every sublime thing: swarms of insects dancing in the slant-rays of August sun; a trio of black horses standing

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<sup>32</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 339.

<sup>33</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 25.

hock-deep and head-to-toe in a field of snow; a waft of beef broth arriving breeze-borne from an orange-hued window on a chill autumn —<sup>34</sup>

It is a long quote, but it captures the style of language often used by Bevins throughout the novel. After “having come so close to losing everything”, his joie de vivre has been amplified ad infinitum in the bardo.<sup>35</sup> The irony, of course, is that he is dead; yet his bountiful language serves as an expression of the appreciation he has gained for the world. The overly poetic language and the seemingly endless lists delivered by Bevins often bring a comedic element to the novel, if only for how purely extravagant they are.<sup>36</sup>

On the other hand, the language employed by both Vollman and the Reverend is far more subtle. Vollman has two attributes that help to rarefy his language. The first is the invented vocabulary he has created to help maintain the illusion that he is still alive. All of the characters in the bardo (with the exception of the Reverend) are in denial as to the reality of their death, yet Vollman is the one character who attacks any challenges to this fantasy with a linguistic gusto that is never matched by the other characters. Using terms like “sick-box” instead of “coffin”, “sick-cart” rather than “hearse”, “hospital-yard” as opposed to “cemetery” and “sick-form” in place of “corpse”, Vollman interrupts any character who seems about to acknowledge their death, as in this exchange when the characters are watching Abraham Lincoln hold Willie’s obviously dead body:

For nearly ten minutes the man held the—

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<sup>34</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 26.

<sup>35</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 27.

<sup>36</sup> For example, his yearning for “a sugar pyramid upon a blackwood tabletop being arranged grain-by-grain by an indiscernible draft” is delightful in its absurdity. Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 27.

Roger Bevins iii

Sick-form.

Hans Vollman

The boy, frustrated at being denied the attention he felt *he* deserved, moved in and leaned against his father, as the father continued to hold and gently rock the –

Roger Bevins iii

Sick-form.

Hans Vollman<sup>37</sup>

Vollman's invented language is a direct response to the position that he finds himself in –if he admits to himself, even linguistically, that he is deceased, it will be an acknowledgement that he shall never return to earth and to his beautiful young wife. Thus, not only is it a wonderful example of an instance of internal stratification of language, but it also provides a window into *how* language can become stratified in the first place. The second heteroglossic trait that sets Vollman apart from the other narrators is the language of his profession. There is a moment in the novel when Vollman and Bevins 'enter' each other, their spectral bodies sharing the same space. The upshot is that they begin to, basically, read one another's minds; it is a beautiful moment in the text as the longtime friends are given complete access into the other's consciousness. It is the first time that each is allowed to truly understand the other, as Bevins notes by saying of the experience: "So many years I had known this fellow and yet had never really known him at all".<sup>38</sup> While 'inside' one another, they also become privy to the other's

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<sup>37</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 58.

<sup>38</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 172.

unique language; Vollman realizes the beauty of life and begins reciting idyllic images whereas Bevins is surprised to find that he is now fluent in the language of the printing press (Vollman's earthly occupation) and knows highly-specialized words like "platen, roller-hook, gripper-bar, chase-bed".<sup>39</sup> Not only is this moment a great example of Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia, it also illuminates how instances of stratified language become dynamic once they enter the world, and how they interact with each other to create new meaning. Vollman's knowledge of printing press related jargon illuminates another of Bakhtin's points, that not only is a single national language stratified as a whole, but that the stratification is "present in every language at any given moment of its historical moment".<sup>40</sup> It may be another obvious point to make, but if Vollman had been born into another epoch of human history – either prior to Gutenberg's invention of the printing press or after the machine had been replaced by more modern technology – the jargon of a printing press specialist would never have been available to him. Therefore, Vollman's language is not only unique to him, but also unique to him at that specific moment of human history, thus providing an example of how Saunders's use of heteroglossia enhances the merits of *Lincoln in the Bardo* as a historical novel.

Another character with notable heteroglossic traits does not even speak. Lizzie Wright is not a particularly important character in terms of the novel's plot – i.e. trying to save Willie Lincoln from eternal enslavement in the bardo – but she does provide a damning indictment against the institution of slavery. In her first appearance in the novel, Roger Bevins describes Lizzie as "a young mulatto woman in a white smock and a blue-trimmed lace bonnet, trembling wildly, of such startling beauty that a low murmur arose among the white supplicants".<sup>41</sup> When

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<sup>39</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 172.

<sup>40</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 263.

<sup>41</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 221.

Lizzie is given the opportunity to speak before the crowd, she does not utter a sound and Saunders renders her muteness as a series of asterisks: “\*\*\*\*\*”.<sup>42</sup> Eddie Baron, in the inimitable language that he and wife share, asks “What the f— musta be done to her? To shut her up so tight?” to which Lizzie’s friend, Mrs. Francis Hodge, a slave herself, answers with a long, heart-breaking summary of the sexual abuse that Lizzie suffered throughout her life.<sup>43</sup>

Unfortunately for Lizzie, her stunning looks (combined with her status as a slave) caused her immeasurable harm. She was raped time after time, by men who viewed her as less than human, an object and a being with no rights, something Mrs. Francis Hodge summarizes by saying “what was done to her was: whatever anyone wished to do, and even if someone wished only slightly to do something to her, well, one could do it, it could be done, one did it, it was done, it was done and done and —”.<sup>44</sup> Lizzie’s muteness is not her choice – it is a literal disability thrust upon her by the bardo, a commentary on the fact that she did not have a voice as a human, that her protests were ignored by people in positions of power. It is Saunders’s powerful way of illuminating the dehumanizing effects of slavery, and the costly effect of taking away an individual’s voice. In a world dominated by language – in which the loudest voice often wins – Lizzie’s silence is a response, a language itself. In the bardo, there is power in her silence.

The final character whose language must be remarked upon is Abraham Lincoln. Though the novel is a work of fiction, it was still a bold choice by Saunders to give voice to one of the most famous and respected men in American history.<sup>45</sup> Interestingly, Lincoln is never given a

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<sup>42</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 221.

<sup>43</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 221-222.

<sup>44</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 222.

<sup>45</sup> Thomas Mallon commented upon the relative paucity of realistic psychological portrayals of Lincoln in fiction, writing that “the posthumous Lincoln, like the crucified Christ, seems to say *noli me tangere* to the novelist”. For a closer look at fictional depictions of Lincoln throughout literary history, see Thomas Mallon, “George Saunders Gets Inside Lincoln’s Head,” *The New Yorker*, February 13 & 20, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/02/13/george-saunders-gets-inside-lincolns-head>.

direct opportunity to speak at any point in the novel. The historical source sections describe him in great detail and Manders, the night watchman, wrote of the President's final departure from the cemetery: "Pres went out saying nothing seeming distracted reached over gave my forearm warm squeeze then hopped upon the back of his little horse".<sup>46</sup> But Saunders does give us Lincoln's interior thoughts, often using the stream-of-consciousness style, as reported by the characters who 'enter' the President's body.<sup>47</sup> The first occurrence of this phenomenon is in Chapter XXI. Abraham Lincoln has entered the crypt and is holding Willie Lincoln's inanimate corpse, speaking to it and crying. Willie's bardic spirit watches this moment and is jealous. He refers to his dead body as "a worm" and says

"Saying all this to the worm! How I wished him to say it to me And to feel his eyes  
on me So I thought, all right, by Jim, I will get him to see me And in I went It was  
no bother at all Say, it felt all right Like I somewhat belonged in  
  
In there, held so tight, I was now partly also in Father  
  
And could know exactly what he was  
  
Could feel the way his long legs lay How it is to have a beard Taste coffee in the  
mouth and, though not thinking in words exactly, knew that *the feel of him in my arms*  
*has done me good. It has. Is this wrong. Unholy?*<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 317.

<sup>47</sup> As noted by Leah Schelbach in her review of the novel. See: Leah Schelbach, "This American Afterlife: *Lincoln in the Bardo* by George Saunders," *Tor*, February 17, 2017 <https://www.tor.com/2017/02/17/review-of-lincoln-in-the-bardo-debut-novel-by-george-saunders/>.

<sup>48</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 61-62. Willie's language throughout the novel is also a heteroglossic treasure. Saunders does an excellent job of bringing to life the voice of a young boy, representing Willie's speech as a series of short phrases and sentence fragments – he completes some sentences but, just as often, leaves his thoughts unfinished. Also, Willie's declarations do not contain traditional punctuation, just elongated spaces to signify breaks in his thinking.

The italics are meant to represent Abraham Lincoln's interior thoughts. Throughout these sections, Lincoln's interior monologues paint the picture of a man suffering under a tremendous burden, a man, on the one hand, grieving the loss of his beloved son, while, on the other hand, struggling to lead his country through an increasingly bloody civil war. Saunders captures the stress and uncertainty felt by Lincoln, by depicting the battles occurring within the president's own head, even connecting the grief felt by Lincoln over the loss of his son to his anxiety regarding the civil war, as when Lincoln thinks "He [Willie] is just one. And the weight of it about to kill me".<sup>49</sup> Two qualities in particular stand out when scrutinizing the language in the Lincoln monologues. The first is, perhaps, unsurprising given the inherent limitations to a language that is *thought*, not spoken: Lincoln spends an inordinate amount of time arguing with himself. As he wrestles with the meaning of his son's passing and the questions regarding the war, a tremendous back and forth is transpiring in his brain. The president poses difficult questions to himself, queries like "*What to do. Call a halt? Toss down the loss-hole those three thousand? Sue for peace?... What am I doing. What am I doing here*" and "*Lord, what is this? All of this walking about, trying, smiling, bowing...singing-of-songs-in-the bath? When he [Willie] is to be left out here?*"<sup>50</sup> It is the same train of thought that anybody facing an impossible situation has experienced, the seemingly never-ending string of doubts that eventually lead to a decision being made. Later in the novel, Saunders's renderings of Lincoln's stream-of-consciousness turn from inward-looking questioning to outright internal debate, with these moments taking on a very antagonistic quality. It is almost as if he has a devil on one shoulder and an angel on the other. Here is an excerpt from Lincoln's mind when he is wrestling with the

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<sup>49</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 155. This connection has been pointed out by numerous reviewers and scholars. For instance, both Thomas Mallon and Merritt Moseley have mentioned it.

<sup>50</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 155, 156.



idea of Willie's death – he knows Willie is gone and that he needs to move on, but he is unwilling to do so:

*(Think it. Go ahead. Allow yourself to think that word.)*

*I would rather not.*

*(It is true. It will help.)*

*I need not say it, to feel it, act upon it.*

*(it is not right to make a fetish of the thing.)*

*I will go, I am going, I need no further convincing.<sup>51</sup>*

It is the internal dialogue of a man who will not face the truth. Deep down, he knows that Willie is dead but he refuses to admit it. Again, this is a situation that all people have encountered (even if the stakes are not as high as the passing of a child). And that is one of the most remarkable aspects of the novel; Saunders could have fictionalized Lincoln's thoughts in a very bland, presidential way, yet he avoided that temptation. Saunders imbues Lincoln's character with a tender humanism that is very relatable, and thus the President becomes, in Saunders's creation, *Abraham Lincoln, a man* rather than a literary portrayal of a long-dead president. Just as Litzie Wright's silence was a language, Abraham Lincoln's thoughts are a language: a barrage of private words and observations, self-doubt and internal debate.

Bakhtin wrote about heteroglossia and the five different ways that it could enter the novel.<sup>52</sup> According to Bakhtin, the major appeal of the novel is that it provides a literary format

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<sup>51</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 245. Abraham Lincoln's denial is quite similar to Hans Vollman's character-defining denial of death. In fact, this is one of the prominent themes of the novel: the basic human desire to, above all else, *live* – at the end of the day, more than anything else, people just do not want to die.

<sup>52</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 262.

for heteroglossia to be showcased – but it is not enough for an author to randomly combine a few “social speech types” and declare a novel to have been written.<sup>53</sup> The author must be a skilled craftsman, talented enough to blend the different voices into a cohesive unit as Bakhtin writes that “the stylistic uniqueness of the novel as a genre consists precisely in the combination of these subordinated, yet still relatively autonomous, unities ... into the higher unity of the work as a whole”.<sup>54</sup> If the different heteroglossic styles and languages do not fit together seamlessly, the work will be an artistic failure. And Saunders is nothing if not a master craftsman. The stratified languages of the characters – whether delivered via direct speech, internal thought or just as a series of asterisks – work together to flawlessly create a whole that is much larger than the sum of their individual parts: a well-rounded portrait of American society circa 1862.

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Given my unfamiliarity with the Irish language, it is impossible for me to truly analyze the heteroglossic language used by Máirtín Ó Cadhain in *Cré na Cille* – in reality, it would be an exercise focused on the various instances of language stratification employed by the novel’s English translators Tim Robinson and Liam Mac Con Iomaire in their *Graveyard Clay*. However, it will be useful to briefly acknowledge the various types of speech-styles found within the text. As mentioned earlier, the novel is stylistically unique because it is composed entirely of dialogue; as a matter of fact, of the five “basic types of compositional-stylistic unities into which the novelistic whole usually breaks down” according to Bakhtin, only the fifth (“the stylistically individualized speech of characters”) can be found in *Cré na Cille*.<sup>55</sup> But Ó Cadhain complicates matters by never identifying *who* is speaking – an em dash alerts readers to the fact that a new

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<sup>53</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 262-263.

<sup>54</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 262.

<sup>55</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 262.

character has started talking, but it is the reader's task to "suss out what each person is saying according to each's own obsession".<sup>56</sup> Just like *Lincoln in the Bardo*, it is a text in which the author leans heavily on heteroglossia as a means to create unique characters.

Ó Cadhain composed the novel in the dialect of his native Cois Fharraige – an area of the Irish Gaeltacht in Conamara located west of Galway.<sup>57</sup> Around ninety characters are given a chance to speak throughout the novel,<sup>58</sup> thus Ó Cadhain had to give each character a specific, heteroglossic voice so that the reader is able to surmise who is speaking. One of the methods that Ó Cadhain employs throughout the novel, in order to make the reader's task easier, is to give his characters' unique 'catch-phrases'. For instance, Caitríona Pháidín is the only character in the text who says "Ababúna" – a footnote in *Graveyard Clay* even states that the word is "Caitríona's personal expression of surprise or consternation".<sup>59</sup> Thus, a single word becomes a precious key: the reader sees the word 'ababúna' and immediately knows who is speaking. Another example of this can be seen in the comical character of Beartla Blackleg who comes to the graveyard at the beginning of the novel's eight interlude. Beartla can sometimes be heard singing the same lines of a song over and over again ("Hoh-roh, my Mary, your wares and your bags and belts ...") but, more often, he begins his utterances by saying "*Bloody tear and 'ounds*".<sup>60</sup> It is important to make a note on the text of *Graveyard Clay* here – the translators used italics to identify any foreign words (i.e. anything non-Irish) spoken by the characters. A footnote to the text states that 'bloody tear and 'ounds' is "Thought to be a garbled version of 'By Christ's Bloody Tears

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<sup>56</sup> Alan Titley, "Translator's Introduction," in Máirtín Ó Cadhain, *The Dirty Dust* trans. Alan Titley (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press and Indreabhán: Cló Iar-Chonnacht, 2016), xi.

<sup>57</sup> Radvan Markus, "The Carnival of the Dead: Translating Máirtín Ó Cadhain's *Cré na Cille* into Czech", *Translation Studies*, 13, no. 2: 168-182, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14781700.2020.1743747>.

<sup>58</sup> Consultation with the supervisor of this thesis.

<sup>59</sup> Mac Con Iomaire and Robinson in Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 10.

<sup>60</sup> Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 210.

and Wounds.’”<sup>61</sup> The use (and misuse) of foreign languages plays an important role in the text, as well as providing another heteroglossic element.

While most of the characters use the above-mentioned Cois Fharraige dialect, there are substantial differences among them in terms of speech. It is another display of the depth of Bakhtin’s theory on the stratification of language to point out that a dialect – itself a subset of a national language – has its own internal stratification, as Radvan Markus points out when he writes “one cannot consider the dialect [in *Cré na Cille*] as an undifferentiated idiom. In fact, every character uses it in a slightly different way”.<sup>62</sup>

Markus explores the language used by two characters, in particular. The first is the character of the Big Master, an inhabitant of the graveyard who is held in high esteem because of the prominent role that he played in the community above-ground, where he worked as the only teacher in the village. The Big Master is one of the few characters who “speaks in literary Irish” – a language register unknown to most of the other graveyard residents who were uneducated – yet he is not above rants of epic depravity whenever his rival in love, Billyboy, is mentioned.<sup>63</sup> Liam Mac Con Iomaire even quips that the Big Master’s cursing culminates “in what is probably the longest litany of curses ever uttered in a graveyard”.<sup>64</sup> The offending diatribe occurs when the Big Master launches this tirade at Billyboy:

May his lying be long and without relief! The thirty-seven diseases of the Ark on him!

Hardening of the tubes and stoppage on him! Graveyard club-foot and crossed bowel on

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<sup>61</sup> Mac Con Iomaire and Robinson in Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 210.

<sup>62</sup> Markus, “The Carnival of the Dead.”

<sup>63</sup> Markus, “The Carnavalesque against Entropy,” 65.

<sup>64</sup> Liam Mac Con Iomaire, “An Introductory Note,” in Máirtín Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay: Cré na Cille*, trans. Liam Mac Con Iomaire and Tim Robinson (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press and Cló Iar-Chonnacht, 2017), xxix.

him! May the pangs of labor consume him! May the Yellow Plague consume him! May the Plague of Lazarus consume him! May the Lamentations of Job consume him! May swine-fever consume him! May his arse be knotted! May cattle-pine, bog lameness, warbles, wireworm, haw and staggers consume him! May the squelching of Keelin daughter of Olltár consume him! May the Hag of Beare's diseases of old age consume him! Blinding without light on him, and the blinding of Ossian on top of that! May the itch of the Prophet's women consume him! Swelling of knees on him! The red tracks of a tail-band on him! The sting of fleas on him! ...<sup>65</sup>

Therefore the Big Master's unique voice is depicted by Ó Cadhain as a specific mixture of the poetic and the earthy.<sup>66</sup> The stark contrast in the Big Master's language is a constant source of humor throughout the novel, for it is comedically shocking to see someone ostensibly so well-educated and highly respected revert to such epic strings of curses at the slightest provocation – and it is a good example of the type of dynamic exchange that the novel, as an artistic genre, allows between various instances of language stratification.<sup>67</sup>

The second character that Markus analyzes is Nóra Sheáinín, one of Caitríona's main adversaries in the graveyard. Nóra preceded Caitríona to the graveyard and has spent her time there ostensibly 'cultivating her mind and improving herself' – much to Caitríona's chagrin – by learning some basic English words and phrases as well as by reading pulpy novels.<sup>68</sup> Markus writes that Nóra's "pretensions are betrayed by her very language, which features fashionable English words ('honest')"; in other words, Nóra uses English expressions instead of their Irish

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<sup>65</sup> Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 156.

<sup>66</sup> Markus, "The Carnavalesque Against Entropy," 65.

<sup>67</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 290-91.

<sup>68</sup> Markus, "The Carnavalesque Against Entropy," 65.

equivalents to show that she is an educated woman of the world.<sup>69</sup> Ó Cadhain derives a great amount of humor from Nóra's ongoing 'quest for culture'. While she has learned some English words, Nóra's grasp of the language is certainly far less than she would have the other graveyard inhabitants believe. From time to time, she mishears and misuses certain phrases as when she says "But I don't understand it, Muraed. *Honest Engine*, I don't".<sup>70</sup> A footnote to the text points out that Nóra is using "a local mishearing of the American-English phrase 'Honest Injun'" and, given the great distance between Conamara and the United States, it seems forgivable for Nóra to use a slang term incorrectly. There is, however, a great deal of irony and comedy in Nóra — the character who seeks to raise her social status in the graveyard through her intelligence and culture — completely mispronouncing phrases. Not content to limit herself to *just* English, Nóra also picks up some French which enables her to 'speak' with the French airman. Shot down and killed during the War, the French pilot plays a vital role in the novel because he provides the graveyard with an international perspective — he is the only character with a true understanding of the war, and his heroism sparkles in contrast to the bickering of the other characters.<sup>71</sup> In reality, Nóra cannot speak French. All she can say is '*Au revoir!*' and '*De grâce*' but she does not let that stop her from speaking to the pilot, which leads to this exchange:

[French airman]: *Parlez-vous français, Madame, Mademoiselle ...*

[Nóra]: *Au revoir! Au revoir! ...*

[French airman]: *Mais, ces splendide. Je ne savais pas qu'il y avait une ...*

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<sup>69</sup> Markus, "The Carnavalesque Against Entropy," 65.

<sup>70</sup> Mac Con Iomaire and Robinson in Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 21.

<sup>71</sup> Clair Wills, *That Neutral Island: A Cultural History of Ireland During the Second World War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 342.

[Nóra]: *Au revoir*. Honest, Muraed, if Dotie didn't know me ...<sup>72</sup>

It is obvious that Nóra cannot speak French, yet her peers are impressed just by hearing her say 'au revoir'. Later in the novel, the characters are discussing the pilot and how nobody can understand him – not even the Big Master, the community's only teacher – when someone interjects: "Nóra Sheáinín understands him better than anyone else in the graveyard. Did you hear her answering him a while ago ..."<sup>73</sup> Of course, the statement is patently false, thus there is great humor and irony in her being praised for her non-existent French skills.

In one sense, it is Ó Cadhain pointing out – and making light of – the isolation and lack of education amongst the people in the Gaeltacht. In a different sense, it is an interesting dialogic choice because it shows another way in which language can be used, specifically that foreign languages (generally short expressions or individual words) can be used to create the impression of sophistication and intelligence.

The dialect of the characters is contrasted by the "more poetic and sonorous" language of the Trump of the Graveyard, whose speeches begin six of the novel's ten interludes.<sup>74</sup> Again, my analysis of the language used by the trumpet will be necessarily limited.<sup>75</sup> However, it will be worthwhile to briefly explore how translators have characterized these passages, as they are markedly different from the dialogue of the characters. These differences are alluded to by the

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<sup>72</sup> Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 23. In translation, the exchange is roughly this: The Frenchman asks, in French, if anyone can speak French; Nóra says 'Goodbye! Goodbye!' in French; the Frenchman is delighted and begins to say, in French, how splendid this new development is; Nóra cuts him off, says 'goodbye' in French and then begins talking to her friend, Dotie, in Irish.

<sup>73</sup> The Big Master has a fantastic excuse for his lack of French. As one character says, "The Master says he's a Frenchman and that he [the Big Master] could understand him if only his tongue [the Frenchman's] weren't sluggish from being so long in the salt water". Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 37.

<sup>74</sup> Máirín Nic Eoin, "Graveyard Clay/Cré na Cille review: New lease of life for Irish classic," *The Irish Times*, April 9, 2016, <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/graveyard-clay-cré-na-cille-review-new-lease-of-life-for-irish-classic-1.2603435>.

<sup>75</sup> And a deeper examination of the (crucial) metaphysical function that the trumpet plays in the text can be found in the preceding chapter of this thesis.

novel's English translators, when Alan Titley writes that the voice of the trumpet acts "as a kind of linguistic and philosophical contrast to what is going on below" whereas Mac Con Iomaire states that "there is general agreement that the prose is markedly denser and intentionally metaphoric" in these sections of the text.<sup>76</sup> Regardless of what various critics view as the *meaning* of the trumpet in *Cré na Cille*, the scholar Máirín Nic Eoin writes that these passages, undoubtedly, serve "to foreground the novel's existential concerns, particularly the sense of the human as mere matter in the cyclical process of birth, growth, decay and death".<sup>77</sup>

The trumpet of the Graveyard begins and ends each of its monologues the same way, by asserting its authority over the cemetery: "I am the Trump of the Graveyard. Let my voice be heard! It must be heard...".<sup>78</sup> Markus notes that – aside from the obvious linguistic differences – the language of the trumpet is also unique because it is the only "instance of a monologic discourse of authority that cannot enter into direct communication with the other voices in the novel"<sup>79</sup>, meaning that none of the characters in the novel appear to have the ability to respond to the trumpet or to engage it in conversation.<sup>80</sup> When viewing the trumpet as an authority figure, an obvious instance of irony is noted by Mac Con Iomaire when he points out that the trumpet's speeches seem "to have no discernable impact on the graveyard inhabitants".<sup>81</sup> Whereas the characters in *Cré na Cille* often argue and harangue one another over trivialities, discuss the day-to-day problems of being a human being in 1940's Ireland or use language as a way to appear

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<sup>76</sup> Titley, "Translator's Introduction," vii. And Mac Con Iomaire, "An Introductory Note," xxvii.

<sup>77</sup> Nic Eoin, "Graveyard Clay/*Cré na Cille* review."

<sup>78</sup> Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 94.

<sup>79</sup> Markus, "The Carnavalesque Against Entropy," 64. For more on Bakhtin's take on 'Authoritative Discourse' see his essay "Discourse in the Novel" in *The Dialogic Imagination*. In short, Bakhtin says that authoritative discourse is language that is static – it cannot interact with any other language in the novel because of its "inertia, its semantic finiteness and calcification." Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 344.

<sup>80</sup> One might, jokingly, argue that the language of the trumpet is too sophisticated for the denizens of the graveyard to understand, let alone reply to.

<sup>81</sup> Mac Con Iomaire, "An Introductory Note," xxvii.



more intellectual, the language of the trumpet is significant in how lofty it is, as it is composed of “metaphorical language borrowed from biology, agriculture, and the crafts of sewing and writing”, according to Máirín Nic Eoin.<sup>82</sup>

Of course, the heteroglossic elements at work in *Cré na Cille* are far more encompassing than I am able to delve into, given the language limitations inherent when working with a translation. It is enough to say, however, that – similar to what Saunders did in *Lincoln in the Bardo* – Ó Cadhain’s use of heteroglossia through dialogue helps to create a well-rounded, vivid and “full picture of a closed community”, specifically a small village in the Conamara Gaeltacht during the 1940’s.<sup>83</sup>

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Throughout much of *Cré na Cille*, Ó Cadhain depicts logical strands of conversation. Sometimes it is simply a single character’s monologue, commenting on ‘life’ in the graveyard or reflecting on their own personal history. On other occasions, two or more characters converse, debating one of the myriad plot points that run throughout the novel. However, there are multiple instances in *Cré na Cille* in which the text appears to descend into chaos, with multiple characters clamoring over each other to be heard, as seen here, in the novel’s fourth interlude:

- ... There was such a day, Peadar the Pub. Don’t deny it ...
- ... That awful murderer who gave me a bad bottle ...
- ... A white-faced mare. At the fair of St. Bartholomew I bought her ...

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<sup>82</sup> Nic Eoin, “Graveyard Clay/*Cré na Cille* review.”

<sup>83</sup> Titley, “Translator’s Introduction,” xii.

- ... I remember it well. I twisted my ankle ...
- .... Hitler! Hitler! Hitler! Hitler! Hitler! Hitler!
- ... A pity they wouldn't bring my earthly remains ...<sup>84</sup>

Devoid of context, the above looks like nonsense – little more than random voices uttering random phrases. It is no wonder that multiple critics have used the noun ‘cacophony’ or its adjective ‘cacophonous’ in describing the language of *Cré na Cille*, yet it would be incorrect to say that these passages are meaningless chatter.<sup>85</sup> Ó Cadhain provides each character with such a unique heteroglossic voice that the reader is instantly able to identify who is speaking, as well as the plot-line the voice is referring to.

Similarly, there is a memorable moment in *Lincoln in the Bardo* when nearly the entire graveyard converges outside the crypt in which Abraham Lincoln has gone to view his son's body.<sup>86</sup> It is a big moment for the inhabitants of the graveyard, for no one from the living world has shown such an interest in *their* world before. Each character is overwhelmed by the need to share their own personal story with Lincoln and, in the end, the characters “abandoned any pretext of speaking one at a time, many calling out desperately from where they stood, others darting brazenly up to the open door to shout their story in.”<sup>87</sup> Over the next two pages, eight characters speak, each in their own unique language: a man admits to having started a fire, a kleptomaniac with terrible grammar acknowledges his condition, a farmer lists off his stock and so on. The result is a brilliant encyclopedia of speech types competing against one another, or, in

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<sup>84</sup> Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 110.

<sup>85</sup> For instance, Radvan Markus, Brian Ó Broin and Alan Titley all use the terms. See: Markus, “The Carnival of the Dead”; Brian Ó Broin, “Máirtín Ó Cadhain's ‘Cré Na Cille’: A Narratological Approach,” *Irish University Review* 36, no. 2 (2006): 280-303, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25517313>.; Titley, “Translator's Introduction,” xi.

<sup>86</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 205-207.

<sup>87</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 205.

the words of the Reverend Everly Thomas: “the result was cacophony.”<sup>88</sup> And really, the Reverend’s statement is an apt description of the heteroglossic language deployed throughout both of these novels: the result is cacophony. Both Saunders and Ó Cadhain take Bakhtin’s theory of heteroglossia nearly to its breaking point. Dozens of characters populate each text, all of whom speak with their own singular style, yet all of the voices still manage to fit “into the higher unity of the work as a whole”.<sup>89</sup> It is a testament to the artistic and linguistic skills of these two authors that they are able to accomplish this feat. Both Ó Cadhain and Saunders use heteroglossia as a way to bring an entire community to life; in the next chapter I will focus on *what*, exactly, those communities are.

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<sup>88</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 205.

<sup>89</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 262.

## Chapter Three: On History and Community

“We had been *Considerable*”<sup>1</sup>

One of the main advantages of setting a story in a graveyard is that it provides a uniquely convenient storytelling mechanism in which the author can bring together an entire community. It allows characters from all walks of life to interact with one another in a way that does not seem forced. All men must die, therefore it is unsurprising to find characters from various segments of society populating the graveyards of *Cré na Cille* and *Lincoln in the Bardo*. *Cré na Cille* depicts, amongst others, a school teacher, a postman, a small shop owner, a pub owner, multiple housewives and farmers, an insurance salesman, sports fanatics, a fanatical Nazi supporter, and a French fighter pilot whereas the cast of *Lincoln in the Bardo* includes the wealthy, the obscenely poor, a printer, a Reverend, Abraham Lincoln and his son, slaves and slave owners, a kleptomaniac, a farmer as well as many others. Of course, a graveyard is not the only setting in which an author could plausibly gather characters from many different segments of society; for instance, sporting matches, religious events, and (in more modern times) public transportation provide ample opportunity for humans to congregate. It can, however, be argued that the graveyard is unique in the sense that none of the characters have *chosen* to be there – there is nothing to link the characters other than their shared humanity and place of burial. Thus, the ingenuity of the graveyard as a story-telling device: it allows the author to bring together an

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<sup>1</sup> Quote from The Reverend Everly Thomas in George Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo* (New York: Random House, 2017), 205.

entire community and to subsequently dissect that community by giving voice to *all* of its members, rather than a select few – it is a contrivance which does not feel contrived.

Both *Cré na Cille* and *Lincoln in the Bardo* are novels that are set (almost) exclusively in graveyards. Characters from every rung of society's ladder are given time to speak and it is through this dialogue that Ó Cadhain and Saunders create realistic, dynamic portraits of communities frozen in time. It is the intent of this chapter to explore these communities – Conamara, on the west coast of Ireland, during the Second World War in *Cré na Cille* and Washington D.C., circa 1862 during the early stages of the Civil War in *Lincoln in the Bardo* – in order to provide historical detail to enrich the analysis of both novels.

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For a European novel set during World War II, it is surprising how little impact the war (or, as it was known in Ireland, 'The Emergency') seems to have on the characters buried in the graveyard of *Cré na Cille*. Surely, if the novel were set in France, England, Italy or a dozen other European nations it would be a major topic of conversation amongst the dead; but, compared to most of Europe, Ireland was a unique country during World War II in that the country maintained its neutrality throughout the entirety of the conflict. However, it should be noted that Northern Ireland was very much *in* the War and suffered enormous casualties as a result, most notably during the bombing of Belfast in the spring of 1941 which led to the death of over nine-hundred people.<sup>2</sup> Ireland's decision to remain neutral was controversial, but was not without reason. In her magisterial book *That Neutral Island: A History of Ireland During The Second World War*, Clair Wills analyzes Ireland during the war: the reasons for the country's steadfast

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<sup>2</sup> Clair Wills, *That Neutral Island: A Cultural History of Ireland During the Second World War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 212-18.

refusal to enter the war, the various effects of the war on Irish society and the after-effects of Ireland's neutrality in post-war Europe are all explored at great length. Given that Ireland had only just earned a measure of hard-fought independence from Britain in 1922, with the creation of the Irish Free State, it is not all that surprising that there was reluctance amongst the Irish to put the past aside and fight with the British.<sup>3</sup> As Wills notes, the Irish were proud of their independence and viewed neutrality as their choice, and theirs alone: "Neutrality was an assertion of autonomy; it was a marker of Irish distinctiveness, as potent as Catholicism or the Irish language".<sup>4</sup>

This is not to say that Ireland was not affected by the war, nor that the country failed to contribute to the war effort. Nor can it be said that Ireland was entirely neutral, for the public certainly identified far more with Britain than with Germany; despite Ireland's best efforts at neutrality, approximately 150,000 Irishmen volunteered for the British armed services throughout the war.<sup>5</sup> Though the graveyard community does not seem particularly bothered by the Emergency, the fact remains that the novel is set during the war and that the war does play an integral role in the shaping of their society and lives.

The location of the graveyard is a fictional village in Cois Fharraige in south Conamara, a rural region in the west of Ireland, and the majority of the dead are locals (aside from a woman from East Galway, a French airman, and possibly the Big Master, the graveyard seems to be composed of born and raised Gaeltacht residents). Two things immediately become clear when reading the novel. The first is that it is a small, tight-knit community that Ó Cadhain is

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<sup>3</sup> John O Beirne Ranelagh, *A Short History of Ireland* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 202.

<sup>4</sup> Wills, *That Neutral Island*, 43.

<sup>5</sup> Wills, *That Neutral Island*, 110. Also, given his political allegiances, it is worth noting (although probably unsurprising) that Ó Cadhain never mentions an Irishman joining the British fighting ranks in *Cré na Cille*.

portraying – Caitríona, upon arriving in the graveyard, appears to have already been acquainted with most of the characters above ground. The second is that existence in this particular area of Ireland is a daily struggle – it is a rural, agricultural way of life with little money and even fewer luxuries, as Caitríona declares early on in the novel, saying “my life was nothing but hardship”.<sup>6</sup> Throughout the novel, as Caitríona receives news from the newly dead regarding her family’s fortunes up above, it becomes clear that her son Pádraig’s successes and failures hinge on livestock and crops, things not entirely within his control – the vicissitudes of Pádraig’s life create a wild pendulum of ups and downs, which fuels Caitríona’s alternating rage and euphoria throughout the book.

The poverty of the community is hinted at early in the novel, when the vituperative Caitríona comments harshly on her daughter-in-law’s dowry:

I myself had to put a shirt on her back. She didn’t even have the marriage fee, not to mention a dowry. A dowry from the Filthy-Foot Breed! A dowry in Mangy Field of the puddles, where they milk the ducks ... He married her, and she’s there with him ever since like the shadow of death. She’s not able to raise a pig or a calf, a hen or a goose, not even the ducks she’d have been used to in Mangy Field. Her house is dirty. Her children are dirty. She can’t work the land or the strand.<sup>7</sup>

Given Caitríona’s willingness to bend the truth, it is logical to doubt the veracity of the attack. Was her daughter-in-law extremely poor? Or was, as other graveyard inhabitants claim later in the novel, Caitríona actually destitute? The answer remains somewhat of a mystery throughout

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<sup>6</sup> Máirtín Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, trans. Liam Mac Con Iomaire and Tim Robinson (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 8.

<sup>7</sup> Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 14-15.

the text, although the answer is, most likely, that neither family were particularly well off. Regardless of that, Caitríona's worries over what she perceives as her daughter-in-law's inability to handle the physical tasks and manual labor involved with the running of a household shed light on the stark reality of the village's situation: largely cut off from the rest of Ireland, each house and small farm walks a financial tightrope between life and death. However, Ó Cadhain does not use the region's poverty as a melancholic device – in fact, many of the characters (particularly Caitríona) seem to exult in pointing out the penury of their neighbors. It is one of the novel's running jokes that almost *everyone else* seems to be incredibly poor apart from whoever is speaking at the time. One memorable comedic episode occurs when the graveyard begins to discuss the lucrative will of Caitríona and Nell's sister, Baba Pháidín, who had emigrated to the United States years before. The characters begin to reflect on those that they knew who received big legacies of their own – there was a man who “was a fine down-to-earth fellow till he got the big money. Neither God nor man has seen him since except standing around on every corner with his stupid face bashed in” and another man is said to have immediately bought “a monster of a motor car” and returned home with “a flimsy little thing” although “the rattle of the car was upsetting her stomach” so much that she went back to her home.<sup>8</sup> These anecdotes are humorous in their absurdity – particularly the idea of a man who, after receiving a large amount of money, seems to find getting ‘his stupid face bashed in’ as the most desirable form of entertainment – but they also illuminate a sharp distrust of money and the potential corrupting effects that wealth may have over an individual. Underlying these stories is another brutal reality of life at this moment in rural Ireland: the acknowledgment that the opportunity for wealth is out of the local people's hands, that their only chance at a substantial amount of money

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<sup>8</sup> Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 282.



is to receive an inheritance from a deceased relative, usually one who has moved abroad to either the United States or England – in short, it is a community without economic hope.

While it would be inaccurate to claim that any of the villagers in *Cré na Cille* are rich, it is still important to note the economic disparity that exists between the characters. This is represented in the graveyard being divided into three sections, each area named after what it cost to inter a body in that particular location. The corpses place great emphasis and social cachet on which section they have been buried in; in fact, the novel begins with Caitríona asking “I wonder am I buried in the Pound Plot or the Fifteen-Shilling Plot? Or did the devil possess them to dump me in the Half-Guinea Plot, after all my warnings?”<sup>9</sup> Upon realizing that she has been laid to rest in the Fifteen-Shilling Plot, Caitríona laments her situation: “... And I was buried in the Fifteen-Shilling Plot after all!”, imagining her misfortune to be the result of Nell’s handiwork.<sup>10</sup> Other than the attendant negative societal connotations, being buried in the Fifteen-Shilling Plot does not seem to infringe on Caitríona’s freedom in the graveyard – she is just as able to chat with members of the Pound Plot or the Half-Guinea Plot as she is able to converse with her ‘neighbors’ in the Fifteen-Shilling Plot.

Two of the most prominent members of the Pound Plot are business owners: Siúán the Shop and Peadar the Pub, both of whom are noted for their desire to turn a profit above all else. When Siúán canvasses the Fifteen-Shilling Plot, in hopes of gaining votes for Peadar in the graveyard’s election, the community turns on Siúán and takes her to task for her unsavory business practices. The list of grievances is long: denying credit to the poor (“You were smooth and sweet to the big shot. You were cruel and contemptuous to the person who didn’t have his

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<sup>9</sup> Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 3. It may be helpful to note that the Pound Plot is the most expensive section, the Fifteen-Shilling Plot is the mid-priced local, and the Half-Guinea Plot is the cheapest area of the graveyard.

<sup>10</sup> Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 12.

penny in the palm of his hand”), hiding war-rationed products and selling them to the wealthy (“And you knew right well I couldn’t [pay], you ugly Siúán. Saving up the tea for those who could pay you three times the price for it”), as well as selling poor quality goods (“Your *clogs* were my killer, you cheating Siúán”).<sup>11</sup> Peadar the Pub, meanwhile, is also criticized for cheating customers, as he is accused of overcharging his patrons (“You were a crook, Peadar the Pub. You charged me four four-penny bits for a half-glass of whiskey and I was so green I didn’t know what I should pay”), diluting drinks (“You were watering the whiskey”) and using his attractive daughter to trick men into buying alcohol (“Your daughter spent the day coaxing him. He soon began to order glasses of whiskey for her, and she only filling them with water”).<sup>12</sup> Ó Cadhain, always the humorist, eventually turns the scene comedic as seemingly the entire graveyard begins to blame Siúán for their deaths and Peadar for their economic troubles. Yet Ó Cadhain’s political stance remains razor sharp throughout the haze of humor. Neither Siúán the Shop nor Peadar the Pub are sympathetic, likeable characters because of the fact that they are driven by sheer financial desires, and their negative depiction seems to coincide with the fact that “Ó Cadhain was a lifelong Republican and socialist.”<sup>13</sup>

Given the harsh realities of life in the Gaeltacht, circa the 1930s and 40s, it is unsurprising that emigration and its lure of new opportunity pulled heavily on the rural young. In a chapter titled “The Vanished Generation”, Clair Wills writes bluntly that during the Second World War “the strained economy of the small [Irish] farm – many with as little as five or ten acres of poor land – collapsed utterly. Registers of population for 1941 and 1943 show that net

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<sup>11</sup> Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 83-85.

<sup>12</sup> Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 86-87.

<sup>13</sup> Cian Ó hÉigartaigh, “Máirtín Ó Cadhain: Politics and Literature,” *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 34, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 28, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25515702>.

emigration in this two-year period reached eighty-five thousand.”<sup>14</sup> Rural areas aren’t typically over-populated, so this mass exodus of young, able-bodied workers was bound to wreak havoc on those left behind – and it did. As more and more workers left Ireland (mainly to go to England) it created a vicious circle in which there were fewer jobs and opportunities and things to do at home, and so, in turn, more emigrated in search of work, as Wills states: “the choice was either to board the emigrant boat or be buried alive at home, in a world with no future.”<sup>15</sup>

Emigration might not be considered a main plot-point in *Cré na Cille*, but it is clearly a topic that is on the characters’ minds as it is mentioned again and again throughout the text. The first reference to emigration on a large scale is made in the novel’s fifth interlude, when a young man – Pádraig Labhráis’s third son – is accidentally buried in Caitríona’s grave, giving them the opportunity to converse:

“You’re only nineteen ... a bit young to be starting this caper, son ... Nine months you were ailing ... Consumption. That’s the killer! This cemetery is fat with it. You were to go to England only you were struck down ... You were all set to go, you say ... The young men and women of Donagh’s village left last week ... And of Mangy Field! ... May they not return, then! ... True for you, my son. I believe there’s great money to be made there ...”<sup>16</sup>

This single passage of dialogue is a near perfect encapsulation of the emigration situation during the Emergency: entire villages of young men and women leaving the Irish countryside in search of work on foreign soil. As the novel unfolds, it becomes clear that the characters are conflicted

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<sup>14</sup> Wills, *That Neutral Island*, 310.

<sup>15</sup> Wills, *That Neutral Island*, 13.

<sup>16</sup> Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 119.

on the topic of England. When the graveyard's Nazi sympathizer prophesizes England's complete destruction at the hands of the Nazis, Pádraig Labhráís's son interjects: "Faith then, England is not to be condemned. There's great employment there. What would the youth of Donagh's village do without her, or the people of Mangy Field, or Sive's Rocks?"<sup>17</sup> It is a concession that, were it not for the opportunity to find well-paying work in England, the community's youth would face a future entirely devoid of hope. Throughout the text, Pádraig Labhráís's third son pops up again and again to lament the fact that he died before he could leave for England. In one instance, when the characters are discussing what they would have done had they not died, he says "I'd have gone to England to earn money and to see the West Headland crowd ... I heard there's a plague of them on the streets of London now, with white jackets ... and monocles ...".<sup>18</sup> While white jackets and monocles might not have signaled extreme wealth in 1940s London, they certainly represent an unobtainable lifestyle to the people in rural 1940s Conamara. It is only by emigrating to England that such luxuries can be had. Yet, there is also the realization amongst the graveyard denizens that emigration, necessary as it may be, is killing the community. The biggest fear, with so many young men gone abroad, is that there will not be anyone left for the young women to marry – one of the community's most vociferous eligible bachelors is, humorously, Tomás Inside, Cairtriona's elderly family member who dies from old-age later in the novel. As Pádraig Labhráís's son says "Since the news reached home every man is off to England. I reckon that the 'autumn of the faint women', as my uncle called it, is quite close now. The women of Mangy Field will not be able to get men to marry them, nor will the women of Donagh's Village or Sive's Rocks" and another character speculates "How do you think they'll [the local women] be in another few years, when there won't be even one man

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<sup>17</sup> Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 171.

<sup>18</sup> Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 291.

left?”<sup>19</sup> Inherent in this fear is the worry that their community (and all of its aspects) will die. Obviously, if a community is unable to reproduce, it will cease to exist, and this was a practical fear at the time, as Wills writes of this era in Irish history: “The small-farmer class was either buried alive by rural poverty or gone to England. And along with the vanishing Irish went the vanishing Irish language.”<sup>20</sup>

The fear that all of the village’s young men, already having moved abroad, will marry outside the community manifests itself, regrettably, in some scenes of racist dialogue between outraged fathers in the graveyard.<sup>21</sup> There is a group of unnamed men in the cemetery, whose sons all emigrated to England to find work and have subsequently married women of different ethnicities (“Never mind your Frenchwoman! My son is married in England to an *Eyetalian*”).<sup>22</sup> One father decries the ethnicity of his daughter-in-law, only to be cut off by another father who is even more disapproving of *his* daughter-in-law’s race, who is then, in turn, interrupted by another man ... and so on and so on. Hiding behind their condemnation of miscegenation is the fact of just how far removed Conamara was from England (and the European continent for that matter) at this juncture in time. Whereas England is depicted as a land where a young man can meet women of different skin colors, nationalities, and religious beliefs, the villages of western Ireland are seen as places where a young woman, should she wish to marry, will have to settle for an aging, alcoholic bachelor with one foot in the grave. The great distance between Ireland and the rest of Europe is hinted at by the actual language that the characters use. Writing on the topic of racism in *Cré na Cille*, Brian Ó Broin points out the importance of the characters using

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<sup>19</sup> Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 185-186.

<sup>20</sup> Wills, *That Neutral Island*, 333.

<sup>21</sup> Though surely intended as comedic by Ó Cadhain, times – and what is and is not politically correct and acceptable – change and these scenes most definitely fall outside the lines of modern notions of decency.

<sup>22</sup> Wills, *That Neutral Island*, 134.

English words to describe their sons' foreign wives: "although there are serviceable Irish words available for black and Italian (gorm and Iodálach respectively), they do not use these words, but their English equivalents, indicating that these two racial or cultural concepts are foreign enough to them that they are uneasy Gaelicizing them."<sup>23</sup> In short, some foreigners (particularly those who are non-white) are *so* foreign to these Irish fathers that the Irishmen are uncomfortable in even using their own language to talk about them – they must use a foreign language, English, instead. Ó Broin investigates racism and xenophobia in greater detail in his text – it turns out that the characters have constructed a sort of racist hierarchy that is actually quite complicated – but, for the purposes of this thesis, it is enough to point out that racism serves as a means to highlight how isolated Conamara was from the rest of the world. This sense of remoteness and extreme isolation is a constant undercurrent throughout the novel and it helps to explain the characters' attitudes toward the war.

Despite Nóra Sheáinín's unyielding (and misguided) quest for 'culture', the locals of *Cré na Cille* are not worldly, cosmopolitan or particularly open-minded. They are very much embedded in the reality of their daily lives, the constant struggle of the rural poor to survive, and they have neither the time nor the opportunity to see beyond their own community – even Galway becomes a near-mythical place in the eyes of some. Wills writes of this era in Ireland that (emigration aside) "the relative poverty in many rural areas, particularly in the poorer land in the West, meant that people travelled little ... A child living no more than five miles from the town might wait until he or she was seven, and taking first communion, for a first visit."<sup>24</sup> It is hardly shocking that such a provincial lifestyle would lead to views like those expressed by the

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<sup>23</sup> Brian Ó Broin, "Racism and Xenophobia in Máirtín Ó Cadhain's '*Cré na Cille*,'" *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, 97 (2008): 277.

<sup>24</sup> Wills, *That Neutral Island*, 28.

‘outraged’ fathers. Ó Cadhain – always the humorist – pokes much fun at the isolated rural lives of his characters and cleverly parodies their old-fashioned way of living, rather than eulogizing it. One of the best of these moments occurs when the recently deceased character of Bríd Terry, an older woman, recounts the first and only time she went to the cinema in Brightcity (Galway):

“‘Were you ever at the pictures, Bríd Terry?’ said he.

‘What are they?’ said I.

‘There are all sorts of pictures shown in a place up there,’ said he.

‘In the Church?’ said I.

‘Not at all’, he said, ‘the pictures.’

‘Pictures of Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary, and St. Patrick and St. Joseph?’ Said I.

‘Not at all,’ he said, ‘foreign countries and wild animals and peculiar people.’ ‘Foreign countries and wild animals and peculiar people,’ said I. ‘Upon my soul, I won’t go near them at all. How do I know, the Lord between us and all harm! ...’

‘You have the mind of a peasant,’ he said, in stitches laughing at me.”<sup>25</sup>

Of course, Bríd Terry’s ignorance is exaggerated for comedic effect, but it does accurately reflect how out of touch the characters are with the rest of society – at this time, the film industry was big business around the world, yet Bríd Terry had never even *heard* of ‘the pictures’ let alone attended them. Another relevant cinema-related moment – although one of far less humor – occurs when the characters discuss all the beautiful, exotic things they have witnessed at the pictures (“I saw beautiful things at the pictures. Houses like the Earl’s” and “People of culture,

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<sup>25</sup> Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 140-141.

nightclubs, quays, tall ships under sail and mariners with skins of every color. *Honest*”) before acknowledging that they would never see the sights of their villages on screen (“You wouldn’t see any drift-weed at the pictures” and “[you wouldn’t see any] flea-ridden hillocks like there were in your own village.”)<sup>26</sup> The characters are not depressed about their lots in life, but they do realize that life could be better.

One of the main forces to break through the community’s isolation and provide it with a sense of unity with the rest of the country is sport. A man who watched the All-Ireland football semi-final at Croke Park stadium in Dublin in 1941 is one of the novel’s funniest characters. He was captivated by the abilities of one Galway player, Concannon, during the match, poetically describing his unparalleled talent like this: “The devil his like of a footballer was ever seen. He smashed and he thrashed and he bashed and he gashed the Cavan players one after another.”<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately for Concannon’s biggest fan, the enthusiast became ill after returning from Dublin to Conamara by bike after the match and, in own his words, the illness “turned chronic straight away. Five days from that day I was here in the graveyard clay.”<sup>28</sup> As a result, he arrived in the cemetery before the final match could be played. Yet, despite having died before Concannon’s side could face-off against Kerry in the final, the man is completely certain that Concannon led his side to victory. When another man comes to the graveyard – a sports fan who was alive to watch the championship match – and reports that, actually, Kerry won the final, Concannon’s one-man fan-club will not accept it. After all, Concannon was so stupendous in the semi-final, how could he have possibly been beaten in the finals, just a month later? When the bearer of bad news asserts “But Kerry won the match ... But you were dead ... And I was watching the match.

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<sup>26</sup> Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 139.

<sup>27</sup> Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 106.

<sup>28</sup> Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 108.



I lived for nine months after” Concannon’s fan explodes “For the love of God! You’re the greatest eejit I ever saw! If you’d watched them a hundred times Kerry didn’t beat Galway.

Wasn’t I at the semi-final in Croke Park! If you’d seen them that day beating Cavan!

Concannon!”<sup>29</sup> The man’s stubbornness to accept the idea of Concannon and Galway having lost the match is, of course, completely illogical – just because the team looked invincible in one match does not mean that they were actually unbeatable – and it can also be seen as a parody of the stereotypical oafish sports fan. But this fascination with one of the country’s most important nation-wide sporting events reemerges from time to time throughout the novel – Ó Cadhain leaves the impression that the two men are locked into an eternal, absurdist, almost Beckettian debate on the outcome of the match – and it is important because it is one of the few instances of a character showing a large amount of interest in something occurring outside of their community, an interest in something that ties their community to the rest of Ireland.

The characters in the graveyard never seem overly invested in the war and its outcome. The negative side effects of the war are commented on throughout the text, but there is a detachment between the characters and the actual events of the war – its causalities and horrors – that is impossible to miss. Certainly, the characters worry about the potentially disastrous effects of emigration, particularly as the war created the need for more work-ready emigrants in England as healthy young men went to fight on the front. As Wills notes, paid Irish labor was a massive factor in the war effort: “Male Irish labor was overwhelmingly used in construction – Irish men built underground air-raid shelters, armaments factories, housing, military camps, airfields, and storage depots.”<sup>30</sup> The characters also bemoan the rationing that accompanied the war and the

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<sup>29</sup> Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 108.

<sup>30</sup> Wills, *That Neutral Island*, 314.

near impossibility of getting enough tea to make it through the week, as well as the difficulty of securing tobacco.<sup>31</sup> Again, the poor women of these villages are left to suffer: “If you had lived another while, you’d see all the young women of Donagh’s Village smoking clay pipes. That’s what they’re doing since cigarettes got scarce”.<sup>32</sup> There is one character who praises Hitler with every opportunity (“Hitler is my darling. He’s the man for them...”) and another man who hopes England will win the war, if only to avoid the potential economic fallout (“If England is beaten this country will be in bad shape. We’ve already lost the market”).<sup>33</sup> However, even the Nazi’s buffoonish and incorrect cries of “*High for Hitler! High for Hitler!*” serve to highlight the disconnectedness between the rural West of Ireland and the rest of war-torn Europe.<sup>34</sup>

The characters’ affectless attitude toward the war is not merely Ó Cadhain’s invention. Wills writes that “in rural areas ... there was ... ‘a terrible amount of apathy’” toward the war in general and toward Ireland’s attempt to raise a passable army in particular.<sup>35</sup> The reasons for this apathy were manifold and intricate, although one of the simplest explanations is that most of the Irish population were simply unaware of what was actually happening during the war. This was due to the strict censorship laws that had been put into place by De Valera’s government in an attempt to maintain public neutrality.<sup>36</sup> In short, many Irish citizens had no idea what was truly happening on the continent. In one sense, the censorship laws worked because, by the end of the war, the Irish population still heavily favored neutrality. From another perspective, though, censorship was a failure. It was akin to an ostrich burying its head in the sand, as Wills writes “the Irish knew nothing from their own sources of the persecution and cruelty in German-

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<sup>31</sup> Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 84-85.

<sup>32</sup> Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 292.

<sup>33</sup> Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 6.

<sup>34</sup> Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 36.

<sup>35</sup> Wills, *That Neutral Island*, 92.

<sup>36</sup> Wills, *That Neutral Island*, 8-10.

occupied Europe. Critics continued to argue that a play-safe approach had led to the sanitizing and distortion of the real course of the war.”<sup>37</sup> Given Ireland’s distance from the war – both geographically and information-wise – it can be argued that the graveyard of *Cré na Cille* is a representation of the entire country’s tangled and distant relationship to the war.

Considering the graveyard community’s geographic remove from the war, the character of the Frenchman is imbued with a high degree of importance, especially in relation to the relatively minor role that he otherwise seems to play in the text. The French pilot is a strange figure in the graveyard: he cannot even speak Irish when the novel begins yet the other characters still view him with a measure of respect (“He had a fine funeral. They say he was some sort of a hero ...” says one character).<sup>38</sup> Over the course of the novel, the pilot picks up some Irish and is able to communicate with the rest of the graveyard – though he speaks a hodgepodge of French and Irish, he is able to get his point across. Whenever the Nazi sympathizer begins to praise the German side, the Frenchman immediately interjects, his disbelief that an Irishman would support the Nazis abundantly clear. The pilot is the only character in the graveyard who is aware of the German war atrocities; indeed, due to the strict censorship of the time, he is the only character who was likely to be aware of the horrors committed by the Nazi Regime. In a brief analysis of *Cré na Cille*, Clair Wills notes how the Frenchman is entirely different from the other characters: while the locals are “obsessed with the petty vanities and jealousies of the other dead” and are only concerned with the progress of the war insofar as to “worry about Ireland’s economic future, should England be invaded”, the Frenchman is international and empathetic, outraged “at the human rights abuses in the ‘prison

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<sup>37</sup> Wills, *That Neutral Island*, 275.

<sup>38</sup> Wills, *That Neutral Island*, 37.

camps””.<sup>39</sup> The pilot really is a startling contrast when viewed in the light of the other characters. While the locals continue to argue over past grievances or to pine for expensive gravestones, the airman places the greater good over any individualistic impulses he may have. When he is told that he was posthumously awarded a prestigious war medal (“Frenchman, my neighbor, did you hear about the newspaper report that you were awarded the Cross for your valor ...”), the Frenchman is unmoved – he does not show any pleasure in the distinction, replying “Ce n’est rien, mon ami. C’est sans importance. Ce qui compte, c’est la liberation. Vive le France! La France! La France! La patrie sacree! ...”<sup>40</sup> The Frenchman is Ó Cadhain’s portrayal of a war-hero: brave and selfless and passionate, even in the afterlife. In that regard, it may be unfair to directly compare his morality to the Conamara locals, for they are just regular people. Nevertheless, the Frenchman’s spotless character does turn a spotlight onto some of the more unsavory aspects of the others. More importantly, he breaks through the community’s isolation and delivers a modicum of the war and its accompanying evils to those who were so far removed from it.

In the introduction to his English translation of *Cré na Cille*, Alan Titley reflects on the timelessness of Ó Cadhain’s characters: “all human life is here; and if you were to transfer yourself to any part of the world even today and to listen to the clatter of local voices, it would be not that much different from what you will encounter in *The Dirty Dust*”.<sup>41</sup> In the first aspect he is correct: all of human life is here. It is an acknowledgement of the cleverness and originality shown by Ó Cadhain in setting the novel entirely in a graveyard. Yet, the second assertion must

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<sup>39</sup> Wills, *That Neutral Island*, 342.

<sup>40</sup> This translates roughly as: It's nothing, my friend. It doesn't matter. What matters is liberation. Long live France! France! France! The sacred homeland!... Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 299.

<sup>41</sup> Alan Titley, “Translator’s Introduction,” in Máirtín Ó Cadhain, *The Dirty Dust*, trans. Alan Titley (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press and Indreabhán: Cló Iar-Chonnacht, 2016), viii.

be considered hyperbolic. Titley is correct insofar as he implies that a large degree of what the characters debate and reminisce about is universal. Caitríona's character is driven by a decades long rivalry with her sister, Nell, a feud that began because of a fight over a man. She is also consumed by economic worry and the desire to be viewed positively, maybe even to be envied, by her neighbors. None of these preoccupations are unique to Ireland during the Second World War and, in that sense, the novel is universal. But the novel is very much grounded in a specific region, during a specific moment in history. Whether the characters realize it or not, the war hangs over their community like a dark cloud, affecting their lives in countless ways. Isolation and poverty – and the subsequent mass emigration to England – are vividly portrayed through the voices of all those already buried in the graveyard clay.

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*Lincoln in the Bardo* takes place over the course of a single night in February 1862, during the second year of the Civil War. In his book *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution*, Princeton University professor James M. McPherson notes the horrific amount of bloodshed incurred on both sides during the war, writing that “It was by far the most violent event in American history. The 620,000 soldiers killed in the Civil War almost equals the number of American fighting men killed in all the country's other wars combined.”<sup>42</sup> Other sources have placed the number of war casualties as high as 851,000, but – whatever the exact number is – the effect of the Civil War on the US and the effect of the Emergency on Ireland are incommensurable.<sup>43</sup> The Civil War was fought between the Unionists in the north and the

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<sup>42</sup> James M. McPherson, *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 16.

<sup>43</sup> “The Cost and Significance of the Civil War,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/secession>.

Confederates in the south. The causes of the war are well known: after Abraham Lincoln, a northerner, legally won the election to become president in 1861, seven states in the south seceded from the Union because they were worried about their states' rights, which can be seen as a euphemistic way of expressing the fear that slavery would be abolished. McPherson summarizes this fact when he writes, "The principal right and liberty that southerners feared would be threatened if they remained in a Union governed by 'Black Republicans' was their right to own slaves and their liberty to take them where they pleased in territories of the United States."<sup>44</sup> The south formed the Confederacy – an attempt to create a new country, one entirely apart from the north – but the north, led by Lincoln, did not want to see the Union dismantled. At this time, the north had a larger population and greater wealth than the south, so Lincoln's desire to keep the Union intact was more than economically driven; in 1861, the United States was "a fragile experiment in a world of kings, emperors, tyrants, and theories of aristocracy" and thus it was Lincoln's responsibility to mend the divide between north and south in order to show the world that the 'fragile experiment' could work and that democracy had a place in the modern world.<sup>45</sup> Aside from its carnage, the Civil War had a mostly positive outcome: in the end, the north routed the south and more than four million slaves were freed.<sup>46</sup> Despite lasting just four years, the aftereffects of the war were immense as the *New York Herald* noted at the time by writing that "this tremendous war has wrought in four years the revolutionary changes which would probably have required a hundred years of peace".<sup>47</sup>

Of course, the outcome of the war was still very much in doubt circa February 1862, the time when *Lincoln in the Bardo* is set – in fact, it was right around this time that the war

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<sup>44</sup> McPherson, *the Second American Revolution*, 26.

<sup>45</sup> McPherson, *the Second American Revolution*, 28.

<sup>46</sup> McPherson, *the Second American Revolution*, viii.

<sup>47</sup> McPherson, *the Second American Revolution*, 7.

morphed from a “limited conflict to suppress an insurrection ... [into] a total war in which both sides were trying to mobilize all of their resources”.<sup>48</sup> Yet, interestingly, the inhabitants of the cemetery are not even aware of the war’s existence until Willie Lincoln arrives. Whereas the characters in *Cré na Cille* are obsessed by gossip from their community and are nearly driven into frenzies of inquiry when a fresh corpse arrives amongst them, the characters in *Lincoln in the Bardo* are far more introspective, more keen to reflect on the tragedies of their own lives than to actively search for information or updates from the real world. The reasons that the graveyard populace of *Lincoln in the Bardo*, compared to the dead of *Cré na Cille*, have such a lesser interest in the world they left behind are numerous. The first is the refusal of Saunders’s characters to admit that they are dead. The second is that – as opposed to the characters in *Cré na Cille* who are completely immobile and thus resort to speech and gossip as their only means of entertainment – the dead in *Lincoln in the Bardo* are able to exit their coffins at night, invisible to the world, and “walk-skim” around their environment, which allows them to roam about and participate in all sorts of timewasting adventures.<sup>49</sup> The third, and arguably most important reason, is the difference in size between the two communities. Reading *Cré na Cille* it is immediately obvious that the dead come from a small, tight-knit community – the characters all seem to know one another and upon arriving in the afterlife they greet each other casually. In contrast, the deceased of *Lincoln in the Bardo*, upon meeting a new arrival or even just encountering an acquaintance from the cemetery after some time apart, often feel the need to provide a lengthy backstory, a short history of their life. Certainly, this is a convenient mechanism by which Saunders can smoothly introduce his characters into the novel, but it also points to the unfamiliarity between those buried in a big city graveyard such as Oak Hill – if they

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<sup>48</sup> McPherson, *the Second American Revolution*, 128.

<sup>49</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 34.

all knew each other intimately, these lengthy introductions would seem very clunky and out of place. According to US census data, the population of Washington, D.C. was 75,080 people in 1860.<sup>50</sup> Regardless of whether the population had increased or decreased by February 1862, it is clear that the dead in Oak Hill Cemetery come from a much larger community than their brethren in the Gaeltacht graveyard. While this deprives Saunders of the opportunity to create the types of rich and nuanced interactions, fed by years of neighborly chatter, that breathe life into *Cré na Cille*, it does provide him with an outlet to populate his novel with a much more diversified cast of characters.

At one point in the novel, the Reverend Everly Thomas gives a dramatic eulogy that serves as a summary of who is in the graveyard, saying “We had been mothers, fathers. Had been husbands of many years, men of import ... Had been young wives, diverted here during childbirth ... Had been bulky men, quietly content ... Had been affable, joking servants ... Had been grandmothers, tolerant and frank ... we had been *considerable*. Had been *loved*.”<sup>51</sup> The reverend’s point of emphasis in making this speech is to remind himself that all of the deceased had, at one point, been human and therefore full of emotion, vigor, and life, yet it also serves as a wonderful encapsulation of how placing a story in a graveyard allows all of society to be depicted. Both *Cré na Cille* and *Lincoln in the Bardo* portray entire communities, despite the fact that the size of those communities is quite different.

Though she does not play a key role in the novel’s plot, the character of Jane Ellis is still one of Saunders’s most interesting and illuminating characters. She is described as being “a stately, regal woman”, lauded by the others for her serenity and “how clean her clothing is

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<sup>50</sup> “1860 Census: Population of the United States,” *United States Census Bureau*, <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1860/population/1860a-45.pdf#>.

<sup>51</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 71.



kept”.<sup>52</sup> When she is given the opportunity to tell her story to President Lincoln, she begins her oration with the line “Once at the Christmastide Papa took us to a wonderful village festival” before proceeding to give a poetic retelling of a magical childhood experience, an adventure which ended with her father buying her an *entire* (dead) deer.<sup>53</sup> She was clearly raised in privilege, so it is unsurprising that her hopes for the future were boundlessly optimistic. Despite the difference in the setting of both novels, there seems to be a similarity between Ellis and the character of Nóra Sheáinín from *Cré na Cille*, who spent time with sailors in Galway and later received postcards from exotic locations around the world. As Ellis remembers of her youthful dreams, “I had such high hopes, you see. The boundaries of the world seemed vast. I would visit Rome, Paris, Constantinople. Underground cafés presented in my mind where, crushed against wet walls, a (handsome, generous) friend and I sat discussing – many things. Deep things, new ideas.”<sup>54</sup> These “high hopes” are obviously far more grandiose than the rustic, more practical concerns of most of Ó Cadhain’s characters, yet they are also the dreams of a child who, devastatingly, does not fully comprehend life during the 1860’s in the United States (or life anywhere else at that time, for that matter). Ellis’s dreams for a magnificent, globe-trotting life vanish the moment she marries a dull, controlling man:

Well, as is often the case, my hopes were ... not realized. My husband was not handsome and was not generous. He was a bore ... We did not go to Rome or Paris or Constantinople, but only back and forth, endlessly, to Fairfax, to visit his aged mother. He did not seem to *see* me, but only endeavored to *possess* me.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 75-78.

<sup>53</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 77.

<sup>54</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 76.

<sup>55</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 77.

Ellis's unhappiness in the afterlife stems from her disillusionment with life; she had grown up feeling marvelously unique, saying "I felt myself a new species of child. Not a boy (most assuredly) but neither a (mere) girl. That skirt-bound race perpetually moving about serving tea had nothing to do with *me*."<sup>56</sup> Yet she became trapped in a shackling marriage, a victim of sexism, told by her husband "that she was of 'an inferior species,' a 'mere' woman."<sup>57</sup> Though, as mentioned earlier, Ellis does not figure in any of the novel's key story arcs, she is still a vital figure in Saunders's attempt to create a *whole* community in the graveyard – her life experiences shine a spotlight on the sexism prevalent at this period in American society. Despite growing up with visions of travelling the world and meeting alluring strangers, Ellis's life, finally, ends up being remarkably similar to the lives led by the majority of the characters in *Cré na Cille*: confined to a specific part of the globe, raising a family, and possessing no real means by which to get out of the situation or improve it.

When using the graveyard as a means by which to view a whole society, two more minor characters from *Lincoln in the Bardo* play a vital role: Betsy and Eddie Baron, a couple, who, "drunk and insensate, lying in the road, [were] run over by ... a carriage."<sup>58</sup> The pair function as representations of the lowest rung of white society, basically an 1860's version of white trash. The duo is memorable for their censored, expletive laced speeches in which they reflect on their debauched earthly existences ("Remember when what's-his-name Tentini almost drowned? Then, when Colonel B. Revived him, first thing Tentini did was ask for his f—ing mug of punch?" Eddie Baron wistfully recalls at one point), yet they also allow Saunders to highlight the tough, meager existence of the American poor at this time.<sup>59</sup> Certainly, this is a different type of

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<sup>56</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 77.

<sup>57</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 77.

<sup>58</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 87.

<sup>59</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 85.

destituteness compared to those living in the Gaeltacht during the Second World War. While he never idealizes rural life, there is an undeniable nobility in the struggle portrayed by Ó Cadhain amongst his characters – despite their many faults, the cast of *Cré na Cille* did, irrefutably, work extremely hard during their lives. The Barons, in comparison, are, on the surface anyways, far less sympathetic characters. They did not work from sunup to sundown, just to make ends meet, as Caitríona and her comrades did. Instead, the Barons boast of their neglectful parenting, involving bouts of excessive drinking and occasional opium usage as well as talking openly of the time that they “left little Eddie [their son, presumably] at the Parade Ground” where he ended up “wandering around in a crowd for five hours”.<sup>60</sup> Unlike those in the Gaeltacht, the Barons did not have their own tiny parcel of land in which to take pride in. They constantly shuttled between different, progressively more abominable homes until they died while living in a tent in a garbage dump, beggars surrounded by other beggars, as Betsy describes it: “That was no f—ing spacious meadow! You piece of s—! That was where all the f—ing scum of the earth came to s— and drop their g—d garbage! ... But first you had to walk around the G—n trash heap. While watching out for those big f—ing rats.”<sup>61</sup> The differences between the Barons’ lifestyle and accommodations, and the way that the poor of *Cré na Cille* lived in western Ireland are blatantly obvious and do not need to be belabored. But such stark contrasts are interesting to note, particularly when also considering the comfortable earthly lives led by many of the characters in *Lincoln in the Bardo*, such as the aforementioned Jane Ellis. It is clear that – similar to modern times – the United States of the 1860’s was a land of great inequality between social classes. Yet, for all of their misdeeds and earthly profligacy, the Barons wind up being two of the more sympathetic characters in the entire novel. This is clearly Saunders’s intention as, at the end of

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<sup>60</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 85-86.

<sup>61</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 323.

the text, the Barons finally verbally acknowledge the sins of their past, thereby redeeming themselves: “Eddie? No. They was our kids. We f—ed up” says Betsy, before husband and wife depart from the graveyard.<sup>62</sup>

In a way at once similar to *Cré na Cille*, yet simultaneously very, very different, the graveyard of *Lincoln in the Bardo* is also separated into different sections, although a more accurate description would be ‘segregated into different sections’. The Gaeltacht graveyard is divided into three sections based on wealth but the corpses are still able to communicate with those in different areas, whereas the American cemetery is partitioned by race. In this sense, the literal layout of each graveyard also serves as a reflection of the society that it is meant to represent. In *Lincoln in the Bardo*, the border between the two zones is delineated by ‘the dreaded iron fence’ – which most of the white dead are unable to cross – and the Barons are notable for having been buried “in an unmarked disreputable common sick-pit just beyond the dreaded iron fence, the only white people therein, thrown in with several members of the dark race, not one among them, pale or dark, with a sickbox [i.e. a coffin] in which to properly recover”.<sup>63</sup> In other words, the Barons were considered to be such low-class citizens that they were not even given the decency of a proper burial. In a sense, they function as the bridge between the African American community on one side of the fence and the more ‘privileged’ white collective on the other side; in fact, it is due to the Baron’s crossing of the ‘dreaded iron fence’ – in order to investigate the commotion inspired by President Lincoln’s visit to the crypt – that the African American community even joins the novel’s proceedings by also crossing through the barrier: “But several men and women of the sable hue ... having boldly followed the

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<sup>62</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 325.

<sup>63</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 87.

Barons over from the mass grave on the other side of the fence ... Were not to be dissuaded ... And would, it seemed, have their say.”<sup>64</sup>

The effects of racism and the institution of slavery as depicted in *Lincoln in the Bardo* will be addressed slightly later in this chapter, but it is important to point out that the Barons appear to be the *only* white characters in the novel who respect their African American counterparts. That is not to say that the Barons should be held as a paragon of civil rights virtue, but their affection for the African Americans, with whom they share a common grave, is made clear via lines like “His hip, in our pit? Is right against my hip ... We don’t mind. He’s our friend” and “Which is where we first met Elson ... On back of that cart ... And been friends ever since.”<sup>65</sup> And when Elson Farwell, a book-smart African American slave, gives an impassioned speech before the entire graveyard, it is the Barons who aid and support him throughout the entirety of his talk. To a certain extent, *Lincoln in the Bardo* is a novel about redemption – the characters are trapped in the Buddhist concept of the Bardo, perpetually reflecting on their gravest errors and sins, unreasonably hoping for a second chance at life and the opportunity to make things right. The only way to stay in the graveyard, and therefore to remain ‘alive’, is to cling to the past, as the Reverend Everly Thomas explains by saying “To stay, one must deeply and continuously dwell upon one’s primary reason for staying; even to the exclusion of all else.”<sup>66</sup> This is another reason why the characters are constantly sharing their biographical details with each other, as, according to Hans Vollman, “One must be constantly looking for opportunities to tell one’s story.”<sup>67</sup> If they let go of their past, they will cease to exist in the graveyard. Obviously, all of the characters in the cemetery are dead and – despite the

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<sup>64</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 213.

<sup>65</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 217-18.

<sup>66</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 255.

<sup>67</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 255.

supernatural elements inherent within the novel – Saunders does not go so far as to resurrect any of them. Therefore, there is no literal opportunity for any of the characters to return to the real world and correct their mistakes but, in *Lincoln in the Bardo*, there is great power in honest self-reflection and admission of past faults. And it is through admitting their past parenting failures that the Barons become two of the most redemptive characters in the novel.

Willie Lincoln's appearance in the graveyard is the catalyst for the novel's plot and indirectly leads to the characters being caught up on current events, when Hans Vollman and Roger Bevins 'enter' Abraham Lincoln and are able to hear his thoughts. At first, the two men had been bemused by Willie's assertion that his father was the current president of the United States – "Mr. Polk occupied that esteemed office" says Vollman and "I knew with all my heart that Mr. Taylor was President" confides Bevins – yet after communing with Lincoln they become certain that he is now the leader of the nation.<sup>68</sup> It is a magical moment in the novel, almost as if each man has awoken from a decades long coma and is now listening to a summary of the world's adventures and progress while they were unconscious, a delight that is illuminated in this exchange:

The rail line ran beyond Buffalo now –

Hans Vollman

Far beyond!

Roger Bevins III

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<sup>68</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 174. James Polk served as president from 1845 through 1849 and Zachary Taylor anteceded him, serving as president from 1849 until his death in 1850.

The Duke of York nightcap is no longer worn. There is something called ‘the slashed Pamela sleeve.’

Hans Vollman

The theaters are lit now with gaslight. *Striplights* and *groundrows* being employed in the process.

Roger Bevins III

The resulting spectacle is a wonder.

Hans Vollman<sup>69</sup>

But the biggest revelation is, unsurprisingly, that the country is at war. When the two men encounter their comrade, the Reverend Everly Thomas, they inform him “We are at war ... At war with ourselves. The cannons are greatly improved ... Soldiers bivouac within the Capitol”.<sup>70</sup> *Lincoln in the Bardo* is very much a Civil War novel, as will be seen when we look more closely at Saunders’s rendering of Abraham Lincoln. Yet, for the characters who populate the graveyard, the war is something that comes *after* their lives have ended and this is an important distinction to make between the two novels. The dead of *Cré na Cille* are fully aware of World War II. Some died just before the conflict started, while others passed away during the war, therefore they are all (to varying degrees) invested in the war’s outcome and they constantly receive updates from the recently deceased. In short, their lives were affected by the war and Ireland’s neutrality throughout the Emergency. In contrast, the dead of *Lincoln in the Bardo* were not affected by the war (it would have been easy for Saunders to place a deceased veteran in the

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<sup>69</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 175.

<sup>70</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 227.

graveyard, but he chose not to) and it is not until the arrival of Willie Lincoln, an eleven year old boy, that the characters are even cognizant of the war's existence. The graveyard's inhabitants did not suffer through the war; rather, they are from the society that, in a sense, set the country on the path *to* civil war. As mentioned earlier, Oak Hill Cemetery was divided into different sections: a traditional graveyard – complete with elaborate grave markers and a crypt – stocked with the corpses of white Americans butted up against a “common sick-pit”, into which African Americans and poor whites were tossed. The entirety of the novel takes place in the larger graveyard inhabited by the white characters and it is not until approximately two-thirds of the way through the text that African American characters actually enter into the story. Some might criticize Saunders for the dearth of page space given to African American characters throughout the novel but it can be argued that what these African American passages lack in *quantity*, they more than make up for with their *quality* and sheer emotional power – by the end of the text, Saunders's view on slavery, racism and their attendant horrors is quite clear.

The first character who turns the reader's eye toward racism during pre-Civil War American society is Lieutenant Cecil Stone. He is one of the most despicable characters in the entire graveyard, and he bursts into the text by recounting his tyrannous ways as a slave owner:

even the most Behemoth of those SHARDS [his favorite slur for African Americans] would lower his Eyes, for it was I who held the WHIP & the PISTOL and each SHARD knew that, were he to Offend me, that Night would be Costly to Him, & my FEE for his Offense would be that one most Dear to him, and I would kick open his Door and drag



his LASS out & remove her to my Quarters, and the evening's Entertainment would Commence, and that SHARD would be made to give off SPARKS.<sup>71</sup>

Unlike the Barons, Cecil Stone is vile to the core and a completely irredeemable character. He has no counterpart in *Cré na Cille*, for while the character of the treasonous Nazi is certainly loathsome, he is also depicted as a buffoon who does not fully comprehend the consequences of his ideology, whereas Stone most certainly understands the consequences of his actions. A more accurate comparison would be the character of Dr. Flint in Harriet Jacobs's important autobiographical slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Dr. Flint, Jacob's 'owner', beat her and lusted after her for years, threatening "to make a lady of her" before Jacobs was able to escape to freedom.<sup>72</sup> But Stone is far from the only white racist populating the graveyard; this becomes clear when the African American contingent follows the Barons across the dreaded iron fence and their appearance is met with cries of disapproval, as the Reverend Everly Thomas recounts: "Then, from among that [white] multitude, came a tremendous shout ... and many people began shouting, saying, no, no, it was not appropriate, demanding that the 'darkies' ... return at once, from whence they had come".<sup>73</sup> The subject of racism and slavery in *Lincoln in the Bardo* is a research topic on its own, but for the purposes of this thesis, let us briefly focus on two African American characters in the novel, two men whose experiences as slaves seem, on the surface, to be quite different.

The first is the character of Thomas Havens. Havens is a well-spoken man who was fortunate enough to have 'kind' owners – "Mr. Connor, and his good wife, and all of their children and grandchildren were like *family* to me ... We ate well, were never beaten ... It was a

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<sup>71</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 83.

<sup>72</sup> Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2000), 59.

<sup>73</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 213.

happy arrangement, all things considered”, he says.<sup>74</sup> Havens, in trying to justify to himself that the Connors were good people and that slavery was not so bad, is engaged in a game of logical gymnastics in which he argues that nobody is *truly* free, as when he says “All men labor under some impingement on their freedom, none is absolutely at liberty. I was ... living simply an exaggerated version of *any man’s* life.”<sup>75</sup> Yet, as he admits, there was a small voice in his head that told him there was more to life, that he was a man and therefore deserved a life of freedom. Although he never silenced that voice, “it did grow rather *quiet* over the years.”<sup>76</sup> The absurdity of Haven’s cognitive dissonance becomes clear as he elaborates further on his life as a slave, reflecting, for instance, on the moments that he had to himself: “I had many free and happy moments. On Wednesday afternoon, for example, when I would be given two free hours to myself. And all day, every third Sunday, if things were not too hectic.”<sup>77</sup> By the end of his speech, Havens’s views on slavery have crystalized. Seemingly counterintuitively, he says that it was actually those short, brief moments of freedom that bothered him most. But his reasoning for this is strong and simple, because of “The thought, specifically, that other men enjoyed whole lifetimes comprised of such moments.”<sup>78</sup> Though he does not play a large role in the plot of text, *Lincoln in the Bardo* actually ends with Havens’s voice; when President Lincoln exits the graveyard just before dawn, Havens (who had, along with myriad other characters, entered Lincoln’s body) decides to remain in the President’s body and rides past the cemetery’s gate and out into the world. And, not coincidentally, Havens’s awakening to the injustice of the institution

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<sup>74</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 219.

<sup>75</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 219.

<sup>76</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 219.

<sup>77</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 219-220.

<sup>78</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 220.

of slavery is a thought echoed by Lincoln himself, who referred to “the monstrous injustice of slavery” as early as 1854.<sup>79</sup>

The second character is Elson Farwell, friend of the Barons in the common burial pit. A slave, but also an autodidact, Farwell educated himself by reading avidly in a failed attempt to please his ‘owners’ and make a better place for himself in the world. The result of Farwell’s hodgepodge of reading and learning is a type of speech that is completely unique amongst the rest of the graveyard. He speaks with incredibly lofty language, yet his train of thought can be hard to follow as pointed out by Eddie Baron: “The sweetest f—er, but talks so G—ed complicated.”<sup>80</sup> In this sense – his somewhat misguided quest for self-improvement – Farwell bears a resemblance to Nóra Sheáinín from *Cré na Cille* although, obviously, their lives are otherwise incomparable. When he falls after tripping along a country path and his ‘owners’ provide literally zero help – basically leaving him to die – Farwell’s earnest acquiescence turns to rage at his betrayal. His revelation that no matter what he did, the color of his skin would always hold him back is similar to thoughts expressed nearly one-hundred years later by the 20<sup>th</sup> century writer Franz Fanon. Fanon, an Afro-Caribbean man, wrote an essay titled “The Facts of Blackness” in which he details the moment that he fully became aware of racism in the world. And this racism – directed at him indiscriminately – causes Fanon to lose his self-identify, as he writes “I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects”.<sup>81</sup> His self-identity is ripped away from him and the effects are (unsurprisingly) devastating: “my body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, re-colored, clad in mourning in that ugly winter day. The Negro is an

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<sup>79</sup> McPherson, *the Second American Revolution*, 52.

<sup>80</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 214.

<sup>81</sup> Frantz Fanon, “The Fact of Blackness,” in *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 109.

animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly”.<sup>82</sup> Whereas Havens is contemplative and saddened when he realizes the rottenness of slavery, Farwell is just plain angry at the realization that he is held back by something as arbitrary as his skin color, fulminating:

I regretted every moment of conciliation and smiling and convivial waiting, and longed with all my heart ... that my health might be restored, if just for one hour, so that I might correct my grand error ... and stride back to those always-happy Easts and club and knife and rend and destroy them and tear down that tent and burn down that house ...”<sup>83</sup>

In short: Farwell wants revenge, saying bluntly “I intend to stay. Here. Until I have had my revenge. Upon someone.”<sup>84</sup> Despite the obvious merits of the adage ‘violence never solved anything’, it is hard to feel anything but sympathy for Farwell’s character, given the inhumane treatment he was clearly subjected to as a slave. Later in the novel, as the text approaches its climax, the graveyard descends into chaos; all of the characters had been jammed into the chapel, watching President Lincoln hold his son’s corpse, until “A mass exodus from the chapel ensued, our cohort fleeing out through all four walls at once ... as the inky night around the chapel lit up with multiple instances of the matterlightblooming phenomenon.”<sup>85</sup> The confusion creates an opportunity for two of the novel’s most racially charged characters – Lieutenant Stone and Farwell – to meet on the battlefield. The fight that follows would be almost comical in how purely exaggerated it is, if not for the horrid racism by which it is undeniably fueled. Their fight resembles a video game in which both characters have employed a cheat code to unlock

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<sup>82</sup> Fanon, “The Fact of Blackness,” 113-114.

<sup>83</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 217.

<sup>84</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 314.

<sup>85</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 318.

unlimited lives; for example, after Farwell “used the stone to smash the Lieutenant’s skull into a flat pulpy mass ... The Lieutenant’s head quickly re-form[ed], he revived ... and again Mr. Farwell seized the Lieutenant by the collar, and threw him down upon his back ... and so on”.<sup>86</sup> In a sense, this clash provides both men with exactly what they desire: the opportunity to beat a human of a different race into a pulp, repeatedly. Vollman and Bevins are the two witnesses to the fight, narrating it for the reader, and according to them the fight seems like it may well be eternal: it “showed no sign of abating” comments Bevins and “it was still going on as we fled the scene ... was proceeding with a fury that suggested the two might well fight on into eternity” voices Vollman.<sup>87</sup>

Despite the obviously far greater significance of the root of their conflict, Farwell and Stone’s eternal royal rumble is quite similar to a number of clashes found in *Cré na Cille*. For instance, the argument between the two sports fanatics over who won the All-Ireland football final, and Nóra and Caitríona’s rivalry are both ongoing, seemingly without an expiration date. The eternal fights in each text are, in their own way, completely absurd, although they illuminate clear differences between the novels and the philosophies of their authors. In *Lincoln in the Bardo* it is clear that fighting is pointless: Stone and Farwell brutally inflict incredible amounts of pain on one another, repeatedly ‘killing’ their enemy, despite it being clear that their aggressions are, in the end, meaningless – after all, they are *already* dead, so it is not as if they can actually ever win the fight. They fight because they are angry, but the fighting is not solving anything. Given Saunders’s personal background as a Buddhist and the clear Buddhist philosophical undercurrent flowing throughout the text, this provocation to peace is unsurprising.

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<sup>86</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 320.

<sup>87</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 321.

In *Cré na Cille*, however, the opposite is true to a certain extent. Rather than avoid conflict, the characters seem to embrace it, at least verbally (trapped in their graves they are unable to physically engage in combat, of course) in order to stay ‘alive’. As Radvan Markus notes, “the instances of verbal fighting”, despite their absurdity, “bring liveliness to the graveyard and thus have the power to stave off the decomposing power of entropy” personified by the trumpet;<sup>88</sup> in other words, the characters, in a sense, fight in order to defeat decomposition, using the energy created by their aggression to fuel their corpses in the afterlife. Markus mentions a brief scene that occurs early in *Cré na Cille*: Caitríona calls to her comrades but hears no reply, so she becomes panicked at the thought of spending ‘eternity’ alone, before saying “Strife is better than solitude, after all ...”<sup>89</sup>. Caitríona would rather bicker and curse and argue with someone than be left alone to face the void of eternity on her own. The battle of the characters in *Cré na Cille* against entropy was already discussed in greater detail in the first chapter, but Ó Cadhain’s pugnacious outlook – which is not particularly shocking given his personal association with the IRA – is still relevant to acknowledge here, particularly in comparison to Saunders’s pacifist view, as it constitutes a key difference between the novels.

The endless bout between Stone and Farwell can also be taken as Saunders’s view on modern day America, showing that – despite the Union winning the war and the abolishment of slavery – racism is still a massive problem, something that continues to pervade society. Before the two combatants recede from the novel, likely to fight literally forever, Bevins has the final say on Farwell vs. Stone; commenting on the prospect of the fight reaching a conclusion, Bevins says that he does not see that happening “unless some fundamental and unimaginable alteration

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<sup>88</sup> Radvan Markus, “The Carnavalesque Against Entropy: Máirtín Ó Cadhain’s *Cré na Cille*,” *Litteraria Pragensia*, 28, no. 55 (2018): 67.

<sup>89</sup> Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, 109.

of reality should occur.”<sup>90</sup> And, given recent events (June 2020), it is clear that such a “fundamental and unimaginable alteration of reality” has, unfortunately, yet to come.

Just like *Cré na Cille*, *Lincoln in the Bardo* is a novel with a tremendous number of moving parts and therefore it is also very difficult to summarize the novel in a brief, coherent way. But one of *Lincoln in the Bardo*’s main themes is President Lincoln’s grief over his son’s passing, and how the President then channels that energy into the war effort, slowly connecting Willie’s tragic death to the President’s belief that the war needed to be won in order to eliminate the suffering of slaves. Although “the historical evidence for such cause and effect is debatable” according to Thomas Mallon, it is certainly within Saunders’s rights as a writer of fiction to bend the truth in order to deliver an emotionally satisfying story.<sup>91</sup> When Bevins and Vollman first ‘enter’ Lincoln, they relay this thought from the President, reflecting on Willie’s death: “*What put out that spark? What a sin it would be. Who would dare. Ruin such a marvel. Hence is murder anathema. God forbid I should ever commit such a grievous –*.”<sup>92</sup> The chapter ends, and the next chapter is composed of historical sources highlighting the incredible amount of carnage occurring on Civil War battlefields (i.e. “The dead at Donelson, sweet Jesus. Heaped and piled like threshed wheat, one on top of two on top of three. I walked through it after with a bad feeling. Lord it was me done that, I thought”).<sup>93</sup> The next chapter returns to President Lincoln and it is here that Saunders creates a direct link between Willie’s death and the president’s thoughts on the war:

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<sup>90</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 321.

<sup>91</sup> Thomas Mallon, “George Saunders Gets Inside Lincoln’s Head,” *The New Yorker*, February 13 & 20, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/02/13/george-saunders-gets-inside-lincolns-head>.

<sup>92</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 151.

<sup>93</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 152.

*He [Willie] is just one. And the weight of it about to kill me. Have exported this grief. Some three thousand times. So far. To date. A mountain. Of boys. Someone's boys. Must keep on with it. May not have the heart for. One thing to pull the lever when blind to the result. But here lies one dear example of what I accomplish by the orders I – ”<sup>94</sup>*

This crucial plotline is, obviously, occasioned by the ability of the dead to influence the living in Saunders's universe, and would not, of course, be possible in the reference frame of *Cré na Cille*.

Of course, not all of the characters in *Lincoln in the Bardo* depict something uncomfortable or act as a representation of an extreme. Beyond Jane Ellis, the Barons, Cecil Stone, Elson Farwell and Thomas Havens, the majority of the characters in the novel are exceedingly ordinary and appear to have led mundane lives; for instance, Hans Vollman lived a humble existence working in a printing press while the Reverend Everly Thomas spent his life cultivating a “stable and grateful state of mind ... via [his] ministry.”<sup>95</sup> These are the hard working people who provide society's backbone, and without them Saunders's creation of a fully-formed community would have been incomplete. Similar to *Cré na Cille*, the dead of *Lincoln in the Bardo* are haunted by universal themes, particularly by loves lost or not found. For instance, there is the important character Roger Bevins who commits suicide by “slit[ting] [his] wrists rather savagely over a porcelain tub” after he is scorned by his lover. There is also a trio of characters, jointly called ‘the Bachelors’, a gang of men who died young before they could find love. As a result, they refuse to depart from the cemetery, choosing, instead, to constantly flit about the premises “seeking any new arrival, or old arrival overlooked, whose unprecedented loveliness might justify the forfeiture of their prized freedom.”<sup>96</sup> Thus, by utilizing the literary

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<sup>94</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 155.

<sup>95</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 187.

<sup>96</sup> Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 261.



device of characters in a graveyard, Saunders – just like Ó Cadhain did in *Cré na Cille* – is able to realize a fully-formed community that is both universal yet also, definitively, tied to a specific place at a specific moment in time. By utilizing voices from all segments of society, Saunders is able to bring mid-19<sup>th</sup> century life in the United States to life. The result is not always pretty: a society torn apart by racist ideology, sexism and economic disparity, yet there is a glimmer of hope for it is a nation led by a president with a growing belief that all men should be treated equally.

## A Conclusion

Both *Cré na Cille* and *Lincoln in the Bardo* are dazzlingly inventive novels and more than worthy of the acclamation they have each received. As we have seen over the preceding chapters, both Ó Cadhain and Saunders creatively use the literary device of voices in the graveyard as a legitimate vehicle with which to depict a community at large. In *Cré na Cille*, a small Irish village during the Second World War is brought vividly to life, warts and all, allowing Ó Cadhain to render a tough, proud, rural community that is struggling to find its footing in a rapidly changing Europe. *Lincoln in the Bardo* portrays a far larger community – Washington, D.C. in the year 1862 – with Saunders bringing together a wide cast of characters, from all segments of society, to create a picture of a racially charged America descending into a violent civil war that would shape the future of the country.

Of course, each author employs the device in his own particular way, which naturally leads to many differences between the afterlives. As we have seen, the cemetery in *Cré na Cille* is a stationary place, in which the characters, unable to physically leave their graves, become reliant on speech, and, occasionally, verbal altercations as a means to pass the time. Moreover, as Radvan Markus has pointed out, the characters' constant bickering may actually serve an important function in that it breathes life into the graveyard, therefore acting as a counterbalance to the entropic force that is the Trump of the Graveyard.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, in the Oak Hill Cemetery of Saunders's creation, the dead are given the gift of movement, as they are able to exit their graves each night and roam about the graveyard, invisible to the living world. This, as a consequence,

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<sup>1</sup> Radvan Markus, "The Carnavalesque Against Entropy: Máirtín Ó Cadhain's *Cré na Cille*," *Litteraria Pragensia*, 28, no. 55 (2018): 67.

results in *Lincoln in the Bardo* having much more of a traditional plot than *Cré na Cille* does – instead of being confined to their graves, Saunders’s characters can, to an extent, interact with the afterlife and the novel ends with a sequence worthy of a Hollywood blockbuster where the characters save Willie Lincoln from being eternally trapped in the bardo.

It is also worth reiterating the stark differences between the author’s philosophical outlooks. As noted in chapter three, the pugilistic attitude of many of Ó Cadhain’s characters – particularly Caitríona Pháidín – seem to mirror his own personal beliefs, as evidenced by his lifelong association with the IRA. *Lincoln in the Bardo*, meanwhile, advocates peace, despite some pretty gruesome violence and imagery that occur throughout the text. This pacifist worldview can be glimpsed, for example, in the utter pointlessness of the fight between Lieutenant Stone and Elson Farwell, and it is logical to connect this outlook with the Buddhist beliefs that Saunders, himself, holds. Yet these differences do not diminish the significance of this study – if anything, they only serve to illuminate the seemingly endless number of variations that the literary device of voices in the graveyard provides to a capable author.

Language – particularly the direct speech of characters – plays an integral role in how both Ó Cadhain and Saunders build these realistic communities, as each of their characters is given a distinctive, authentic voice with which to differentiate themselves, with the way those voices interact with one another adding dynamism to the texts. Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of heteroglossia perfectly encapsulates the complex dialogue and language found within each novel, as each text contains numerous instances of language stratification, as has been shown in chapter two.

Each novel is composed of an impressive array of types and range of language, which Ó Cadhain and Saunders rely on to build their worlds. In *Cré na Cille*, there is only one character

(the French pilot) who does not speak Irish as his native language. However, different registers of Irish are used by different characters – for instance, the Big Master, the most educated member of the community, typically speaks in a learned, more formal way than the other, less educated corpses. Foreign languages also play a role throughout *Cré na Cille*, as German, French, and English words all appear throughout the novel; for instance, there is Nóra Sheáinín, the character whose macaronic speech comically contains misuses of English words and phrases in her futile quest to become ‘cultured’, and there is also the French airman who even manages to learn Irish while in the great beyond.

While *Lincoln in the Bardo* only contains English speaking characters, the novel, similarly to *Cré na Cille*, also depicts many different dialects. Social class can be seen as the distinguishing feature as to the type of language used by Saunders’s characters. For example, the language used by solidly middle-class citizens like Hans Vollman, Roger Bevins, and Mrs. Ellis is completely different to the language employed by the Barons, the husband and wife who cling to the lowest rung of society’s ladder. The Barons curse with reckless abandon, whereas Vollman, Bevins, and Ellis all speak with a measure of dignity and decorum. There is even the autodidactic character of Elson Farwell, who merges the language of two very distinct worlds in his memorable speech near the end of the novel. A slave in real life, Farwell feverishly taught himself to read and imbibed as much knowledge as he could, but the result is an erratic, often incoherent mixture of lofty words and phrases.

As seen in chapter two, the language of the graveyard’s trumpet provides a stark contrast to the dialogue between the corpses in *Cré na Cille*; while the dead bicker, retell old stories, and rehash the latest gossip from the real world, the Trump of the Graveyard promulgates serious issues like life, death, and the inevitable decay of all matter. The trumpet speaks in an elevated

language register, using extensive metaphors and poetic devices like alliteration, and his speeches contribute a sense of seriousness to the text. *Lincoln in the Bardo* does not contain a voice anywhere near as authoritative as *Cré na Cille*'s trumpet, but Saunders augments the range of language types in his novel by including various historical sources. As explored in the thesis's second chapter, some of these sources are authentic while others are fictional, and they function as a way to provide the novel with a historical perspective. The historical sources are pulled from a wide range of literary genres such as the autobiography, personal correspondence, and historiography and they combine to add another layer to the text's dynamic use of language.

Setting their novels in a community cemetery allows both Ó Cadhain and Saunders to populate their text with characters from all segments of society. The rich, the poor, and the middle class are all buried on a single, limited, defined piece of land, and are subsequently provided the opportunity (or, in some cases, they are almost forced) to interact in ways which might not have been plausible on earth. We have already listed, to a large degree, the plethora of different characters found in each novel, so there is no need to do so again and belabor the point. However, it is essential to, once more, summarize the impressive range of each community that these authors are able to portray. As explored in chapter three, the village in *Cré na Cille* is by no means a wealthy place, and nearly all of the dead struggled to eke out a meager existence during their lives; yet it is still a society with distinct social classes, as personified by the three sections of the cemetery, each with their own price per grave. Two merchants – Siúán the Shop and Peadar the Pub – represent 'high society', while Caitríona and her cohort in the Fifteen-Shilling Plot are emblematic of the typical villager in the west of Ireland during the 1940s.

The society depicted in *Lincoln in the Bardo* is one of far greater inequality than what is illustrated by Ó Cadhain. Vollman, Bevins, and the Reverend Everly Thomas – the novel's

narrative core – can be viewed as representative of the middle class, but Saunders also populates the text with characters from the highest of society all the way to its very depths. It is interesting to point out that the Barons, the aforementioned utterly destitute couple, become two of the novel's most redemptive characters, whereas Lieutenant Stone, the lecherous slave owner (with slave 'ownership' being, presumably, an indicator of personal wealth in pre-Civil War America) is the only *completely* despicable, irredeemable character to appear in either of these novels.

Of course, both *Cré na Cille* and *Lincoln in the Bardo* act as representations of specific communities at specific points in time. While a small village in the rural west of Ireland during World War II and Washington, D.C. on the eve of the Civil War may not, on the surface, have much in common, there are plenty of parallels which can be drawn between characters across the two texts. Aside from more universal themes like regret over squandered romance, there are also specific characters that can be linked with one another; to provide but one example, Nóra Sheáinín and Mrs. Ellis are connected for unfortunate reasons – both women, in their youths, had notions of breaking beyond their limited roles in society, yet, ultimately, these dreams proved impossible in societies that repressed women.

The portrayal of characters from all walks of life, combined with the unique, heteroglossic language given to each of those characters, is one of the key reasons why both *Cré na Cille* and *Lincoln in the Bardo* demonstrate that a graveyard can serve as an ideal device for an author to depict the entirety of a community.

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In his 1976 essay entitled “Encyclopedic Narrative: From Dante to Pynchon”, the literary theorist Edward Mendelson laid out his concept for what he called the “encyclopedic narrative.”

Mendelson's criteria for what constitutes an encyclopedic narrative was so stringent that just seven works from the entire *history* of literature met his requirements, as he writes: "I know of only seven [encyclopedic narratives]: Dante's *Commedia*, Rabelais' five books of Gargantua and Pantagruel, Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, Goethe's *Faust*, Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Joyce's *Ulysses*, and ... Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*."<sup>2</sup>

As noted, the conditions outlined by Mendelson for a text to reach the status of an encyclopedic narrative are extensive,<sup>3</sup> and there is no point in going into all of them here as it would be *very* difficult – and an entirely different matter – to argue that either *Cré na Cille* or (particularly) *Lincoln in the Bardo* should ever be considered as such. However, as an aside, it is worthwhile to acknowledge two of Mendelson's standards, for each relates to Ó Cadhain's and Saunders's novels. The first is when Mendelson writes that the "Encyclopedic narrative identifies itself not by a single plot or structure, but by encompassing a broad set of qualities".<sup>4</sup> Of course, as we have seen time and time again, both *Cré na Cille* and *Lincoln in the Bardo* are notable for their complexity – it is nearly impossible to summarize either text in a simple, coherent manner because both of these novels have so many moving parts. Mendelson's second relevant benchmark is as follows: "Each encyclopedic narrative is an encyclopedia of literary styles, ranging from the most primitive and anonymous levels of proverb-lore to the most esoteric heights of euphuism."<sup>5</sup> Certainly both *Cré na Cille* – with its diversity of speech types – and *Lincoln in the Bardo* – with its mixture of dialogue and real and imaginary historical sources – would pass this criterion with flying colors. It is also interesting to note the similarity between

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<sup>2</sup> Edward Mendelson, "Encyclopedic Narrative: From Dante to Pynchon," *MLN*, 91, no. 6, Comparative Literature (December, 1976): 1267.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, one of Mendelson's requirements is that, in an encyclopedic narrative, "None of their narratives culminates in a completed relation of sexual love." Mendelson, *Encyclopedic Narrative*, 1271.

<sup>4</sup> Mendelson, *Encyclopedic Narrative*, 1270.

<sup>5</sup> Mendelson, *Encyclopedic Narrative*, 1271.

Mendelson's definition of the encyclopedic narrative and Bakhtin's definition of the novel, as seen in Chapter Two when Bakhtin writes that the novel "can be defined as a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized"; while both theorists use slightly different language to define the novel, they both highlight the multifarious aspects that are inherent within it.<sup>6</sup> Instead of delving into Mendelson's 'encyclopedic' definition of the encyclopedic narrative, a broader, more succinct definition shall suffice for our purposes: according to Mendelson, "Encyclopedic narratives all attempt to render the full range of knowledge and beliefs of a national culture, while identifying the ideological perspectives from which that culture shapes and interprets its knowledge."<sup>7</sup> Just as an encyclopedia acts as a compendium of all human knowledge, a successful encyclopedic narrative is a fictional text which portrays the entirety of a country's "knowledge and beliefs".<sup>8</sup> Given this slightly more limited definition of Mendelson's concept, it is reasonable to assert that the literary device of voices in the graveyard can be seen as an interesting way of attempting to create an encyclopedic narrative.

The literary motif of voices in the graveyard is too hyper-specific to ever be considered as its own genre, despite the fact that it has been employed in other, notable literary works such as "Bobok" and *Spoon River Anthology*. Yet the fact that it is used so successfully in both *Cré na Cille* and *Lincoln in the Bardo*, as a means to create portrayals of entire communities frozen in time, proves that it is a literary trope to be reckoned with; in fact, in the hands of a talented author, one might describe the device as being 'encyclopedic'.

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<sup>6</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1983), 262.

<sup>7</sup> Mendelson, *Encyclopedic Narrative*, 1269.

<sup>8</sup> Mendelson, *Encyclopedic Narrative*, 1269.



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## Abstract in English

The intent of this thesis is a comprehensive comparison between Máirtín Ó Cadhain's novel *Cré na Cille* (1949) and George Saunders's novel *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017). A particular emphasis is placed on both Ó Cadhain and Saunders's use of the literary device of 'voices in the graveyard' as a method of depicting an entire community. The first chapter focuses on the afterlives portrayed in each novel – Saunders's fantastical reimagining of the Tibetan Buddhist concept of the bardo is contrasted against Ó Cadhain's metaphysical, yet nearly nonreligious afterlife. The second chapter uses Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia to analyze the language used by the characters in both novels. The third chapter begins by providing historical background on the settings of each novel (*Cré na Cille* takes place during World War II and *Lincoln in the Bardo* is set during the early days of the Civil War). It then explores how some of the two text's major characters fit within those specific epochs. The thesis then summarizes the key reasons that the device of 'voices in the graveyard' can serve as an ideal means of portraying a community in toto. In conclusion, the thesis briefly investigates Edward Mendelson's idea of the encyclopedic narrative and where *Cré na Cille* and *Lincoln in the Bardo* fit within this concept.

## Abstrakt v češtině

Záměrem této diplomové práce je zevrubné porovnání mezi románem *Cré na Cille* (1949) Máirtína Ó Cadhaina a románem *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017) George Saunderse. Zvláštní důraz je kladen na to, jak Ó Cadhain a Saunders používají literární techniky ‘hlasů na hřbitově’ jako metody vyobrazení komunity. První kapitola se zaměřuje na vyobrazení posmrtného života, které je pro oba romány zásadní – Saundersovo fantastické přepracování konceptu barda, které je vlastní tibetskému buddhismu, kontrastuje s metafyzickým a přesto téměř bezbožným posmrtným životem v románu Ó Cadhaina. Druhá kapitola využívá teorii různorečí Michaila Bachtina k analýze jazyka používaného postavami v obou románech. Třetí kapitola začíná nástinem historického pozadí obou románů (*Cré na Cille* se odehrává během druhé světové války a *Lincoln in the Bardo* v počátcích americké občanské války) a následně se zabývá tím, jak některé z hlavních postav obou děl zapadají do těchto specifických epoch. Práce poté shrnuje klíčové důvody, proč literární technika ‘hlasů na hřbitově’ může sloužit jako ideální prostředek k zobrazení komunity v její celistvosti. Závěr práce stručně zkoumá myšlenku encyklopedického vyprávění Edwarda Mendelsoona a zvažuje, zda a jakým způsobem *Cré na Cille* a *Lincoln in the Bardo* do tohoto konceptu zapadají.